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Paul Di Filippo, prolific denizen of Providence, is the author of such books as Lost Pages, Joe's Liver, and Ciphers. His latest tale for us follows from his previous stories "Stink Lines" and "Fractal Paisleys" in its pop-culture leanings. This one owes its origins to that British band called The Cure. It also owes its origins, Paul notes, to his meeting Erin Kennedy (daughter of Silver Web editor Ann Kennedy) and discovering her fondness for the band. Curiously, Mr. Di Filippo denies that he wrote this one off the top of his head.

Doing the Unstuck

By Paul Di Filippo

1.

In Between Days

TEN TIMES LARGER THAN life and twice as sobering, Robert Smith's visage brooded down from the ceiling of Erin Merkin's bedroom.

Perched on a shadowy staircase, the lead vocalist and lyricist for the British band called the Cure had been captured by the camera in an implacably Gothic moment. His gamin features, layered in white and black makeup, if juxtaposed next to the face of one of his spiritual ancestors — Poe or Shelley, perhaps — would have caused those infamous mopes to be viewed as positively Pollyanna-ish. Smith wore enough mascara and liner around his sad eyes to impersonate a raccoon, and his lips were lacquered in a red so dark as to appear black.

Most astonishing and compelling, however, was Smith's hair. A wild pouf of dyed black, Smith's hairdo appeared less a deliberate look than the

result of a lightning strike or unwise tampering with a fuse box. Radiating in every direction like a nest of snakes, the singer's spiky elflocks projected such a dynamic image that they practically assumed a separate identity.

From the giant poster pasted to the ceiling, this postmodern Rimbaud known as Robert Smith glowered down with the classically alluring despair so attractive to sensitive and disaffected youth (a despair best captured in Smith's own line, "Yesterday I got so old I felt like I could die") upon the lone inhabitant of this tidy suburban adolescent's bedroom, typical save for its Gothic clutter: Erin Merkin.

Hopelessly fourteen, Erin lay as if rigidly pinned on her back laterally across her daytime-madeup bed, her clothes and demeanor offering a startling contrast to the frilly pink counterpane. From her bureau-top CD player, set to endless repeat of a single track, the melancholy Mr. Smith warbled "To Wish Impossible Things" over and over, bathing the young girl in waves of weltschmerz.

Completely kitted out in light-devouring black, from monstrously large boots to loose multi-pocketed cargo pants and on up to a voluminous long-sleeved T-shirt (advertising a brand of very long nails not sold at hardware stores), Erin was instantly recognizable as a stout-hearted acolyte of Mister Smith and Company. A tackle-box's worth of plastic and metal fixtures serving as jewelry — embedded into flesh or simply hanging loose — completed her outfit.

The only anomaly in Erin's chosen appearance was her hair. Chin-length, fine and supple and colored like glossy-wet autumn oak leaves, her coif suited more a folk singer or hippie communard than a club-hopping night-gaunt.

Erin's own thoughts must have been focused on this same disfiguring incongruity, for her pale, pretty round face suddenly contorted in a fierce scowl, elevating her silver nose-stud nearly an inch, and she reached up both hands to tug at her hair.

Emitting a rough growl, Erin sought to yank her hair out by its roots, but with an admirable healthy tenacity it resisted her best efforts. Finally admitting defeat, Erin released her innocently offensive hair and dug one hand into a lumpy thigh pocket. The hand — its chewed nails painted a gruesome shade sold under the name "Ghetto Grit" — emerged

clutching a small cellphone. Erin prodded its buttons with displaced furiousness.

"Hello, Elise? Yeah, it's me. No, she wouldn't let me. I hate her! I don't care if she is my mother. She doesn't understand me and she never will! Yeah, well, you're lucky. Listen, meet me at the boardwalk. Homework? Are you a total pus-bucket or what? Okay, see you there."

Erin repocketed the phone and stood up. Snatching a backpack from a hook (the pack's fabric plastered with stickers), Erin clomped out, her boots raising a din as if every last British POW were marching defiantly across the Bridge on the River Kwai.

From his coign, the implacable Robert Smith surveyed the empty room, his dour expression syncing most portentously with the unattended CD player's pronouncement that "The stars are dimmed by clouds and tears, and all I wish is gone away."

2.

Standing on a Beach

The boardwalk stretched empty under a November sun pale as cottage cheese. The arcades and vendor stalls running parallel to the boardwalk along its western edge wore protective plywood cladding across their doors and windows, against the coming winter. The unpopulated beach beyond the railings immediately to the east, its lifeguard towers stored away now in nearby sheds, assumed a primeval cast, as if the patient shore and questing sea had stolidly consorted just so for millennia without human intervention.

The stomping walk with which Erin had departed her bedroom had abated in fury, acquiring a more resigned and leaden tone. She moved her weighty boots in a desultory manner, gradually approaching a bench that faced the sea. She dropped down, slinging her pack beside her onto the slatted seat. For a minute or so, she gazed pensively toward the horizon. Then, a chill wind caused her to shiver and dig in her knapsack. From it she removed a leather vest adorned with emblems and pins. After donning this ineffective garment over her long-sleeved shirt, she continued to root through her bag, coming up with a pack of bidis and a

lighter. Soon the maritime-scented air was overlaid with a sweet herbal perfume.

Erin puffed meditatively for a time, apparently heedless of her surroundings, until without apparent cue she lifted her pack of Indian cigarettes out of her lap, upward and backward over her shoulder.

"Thanks."

Elise had arrived, strolling up directly behind Erin. Now the second girl took a bidi and lit up also, before swinging around to share the bench with her friend.

Elise Bamonte evinced an obvious spiritual sisterhood with Erin. The restricted palette of her wardrobe bespoke a shared allegiance to all things Goth. But Elise completed the regulation look with a tangle of bottle-black, pink-streaked hair perched above her longish plain face like an untidy gull's nest on a cliff.

Erin cast a covetous glance at her friend's hair, then stubbed out her cigarette and flicked the butt away.

"My god, I can't *stand* it! Look at your *hair*! It's so awesome!"

Elise primped, proud of her finest feature. "It hasn't seen a comb in six months now."

Erin batted at the silky drapery of her own hair. "What I wouldn't give to get rid of *this* mess. But *she* won't let me!"

"Tell me why again?"

"My father. She keeps reminding me of how much he 'adored' my hair. I can change anything else about my looks but that. Jesus, I loved the guy too, and I'm really sad he's dead. But it's like I'm walking around with his *tombstone* on my head for two years now."

"Bummer. What if you just went ahead and did it anyway?"

"She'd probably scream and cry and wail so much I'd feel like shit. Then who knows? Maybe she'd kick me out, send me to live with Aunt Gladys. I sure don't want that. I like my Mom most of the time, and I like my home too. But I can't stand this dictator shit."

Elise finished her smoke. "What about running away?"

Erin vented a dismissive snort. "Where to? I don't want to end up some skanky ancient thirty-year-old slut in a *bus* depot with like dozens of *heroin* needles sticking out of me!"

"I don't know what to say then. Charlotte sometimes —"

"Oh, the hell with Charlotte! She's a spoiled rich bitch. No, I've got to face it — I'm stuck for good right where I am."

Elise obligingly changed the subject. For half an hour the girls talked about school, about boys and teachers and cliques. They traded information about new brands of nail polish. And they discussed items of musical interest, such as the possibility that the Cure might go on tour and play an unannounced free concert at the local civic center, where Elise and Erin would be invited from the front-row audience to come onstage.

But eventually, as the sun began to sink lower behind the friends' backs, Elise announced that she had to go, since her mother would be serving her favorite meal soon: nachos and ramen.

"That's cool," Erin replied with forced insouciance. "I'm just going to hang here a little longer."

Elise soon dwindled down the short streets leading back to town. The growing cold prodding her now, Erin stood and descended several steps to the sand. Assuming a woeful look of supreme martyrdom, she began to scuff along the beach, her clodhoppers sending explosive goutts of sand aloft, dragging her knapsack by its straps like some bohemian Christopher Robin pulling a drunken Pooh by one stuffed leg.

3.

From the Edge of the Deep Green Sea

The eastern sky above the ocean began to purple, like some lost platoon, a swath of afternoon blue in the celestial west fought to sustain itself against the scarlet sunset on one flank and the encroaching Tyrian shades sweeping in from the other.

Erin halted her aimless trudging about half a mile from the amusement center, at an undeveloped spot where only dunes bordered the beach. Here was a site to match her hopelessness: meaningless, barren, wind-swept, unwired. She faced out to the uncaring waters.

Like a sudden eruption of whiteheads, the strongest stars had begun to pimple the night's complexion. As Erin watched, one errant light detached itself and began to fall.

Wide-eyed, the girl observed the falling star grow larger and larger. Its

vivid nearby passage through the atmosphere was soon traced by a corona of flame. A sizzling and crackling noise accompanied its wild flight.

And then the star fell into the sea with a surprisingly small splash, several hundred yards offshore.

Erin wistfully addressed the sunken luminary. "Wow! Does this mean I get a wish? I forgot to make one while you were falling, though, Mister Star. Still, what have I got to lose? Okay, here goes — I wish, I wish — I wish to get unstuck!"

Dropping down to the sand in an easy half-lotus posture, Erin resolved to await any possible results of her spontaneous appeal to cosmic magic.

Her appeal was answered in about twenty minutes.

From the surf crawled an unnatural entity Erin could only partially perceive in the waning light. It appeared to have a myriad small candy-striped legs emanating from a body resembling a mass of sodden seaweed.

Erin jumped up and began to back away slowly.

The creature crawled up to the wrack at the waterline and stopped. Then, in a reassuringly cute canine manner, it shook itself free of water.

Immediately Erin beheld a miracle: there before her stood Robert Smith's living hair.

The creature now resembled a fright wig with innumerable small tentacles on its underside. Whatever body the hair and crawly feet were attached to was practically one-dimensional, a thin scalp. No sensory organs showed. But whatever the creature lacked in substantial torso, it made up for in pelt. Its black spiky Medusan tumult of hair could have outfitted both Mr. and Mrs. Robert Smith, with enough to spare for an heir.

Instinctively reassured by such a delightful appearance, Erin inched closer to the sea-creature.

"Here, little guy, here I am. Can I pet you?"

Erin extended her hand. The creature quivered playfully in response.

Then in a flash it leaped onto her arm, scuttled up to the top of her head, and clamped down with every last delicate yet exceedingly sharp leg.

4.

Why Can't I Be You?

For a microsecond or three, Erin felt as if a million hungry children were digging into her skull with blunt spoons. She tried to scream, but only a gargled cacophony emerged. Her vision cycled through a kaleidoscope of weird psychedelic effects, and her ears filled with oscillating sourceless squeals. The stud in her nose seemed to flame white-hot. Muscles twitched up and down her body like a bowl of earthworms goosed by electric current, and her mouth filled with a banquet of tastes known and unknown.

Then normality resumed. All pain vanished. Her senses reported familiar surroundings: sand, sky, stars and sea; swoosh of cold wind and scent of drying kelp.

And the creature who had attacked her? Gone, or still resting on her seemingly unburdened skull?

Tentatively, Erin reached up to the level of her chin. With uncommon gratitude, she touched her despised long sleek hair —

But at the instant she did so, all her hair was retracted upward, like a snapped rollershade or slurped spaghetti!

"Eeek!" Erin stifled her squeals after the first one. Very carefully, as if balancing a weightless book on her head, she bent down to retrieve her pack. From within, she removed a makeup mirror.

There was just enough radiance from dusky sky and city streetlamp spillover for her to see herself faintly.

Call her Robert Smith's female clone. An extravagant mass of dark twisted hair topped Erin's skull.

As she studied herself incredulously in the small glass, she saw a tendril of hair extend itself downward. The hair coiled around the mirror and angled the compact to its satisfaction.

"Yes, that's better. Thank you for the loan of your eyes and cranium. Quite a nice fit."

The voice possessed a self-assured genderless vibrancy, and seemed to emanate impossibly from a spot only an inch away from Erin's ears.

"Who — who's talking?" ~

"It is I, your new friend."

"Are you using telepathy on me?"

"Not as conventionally defined. I do have access to your neurological states, but reading them directly is awkward and time-consuming. However, I can tap and interpret your nerve impulses just before they reach your vocal mechanisms, in effect 'hearing' you speak. Then, I supply my responses direct to your auditory inputs. Much easier than trying to tamper with the complexities of your cortex."

"So no one but me can hear you?"

"Correct."

Erin pocketed her mirror and covered her ears with her hands. She mimed the words "Say something" without actually speaking.

"A very clever test of my statements. I can see you possess a sharp intelligence, Erin."

Erin dropped her hands. "Thanks — I guess. That's what all my teachers say, just before they flunk me. Wait a minute — how did you know my name?"

"As I said, I have access to your brain and its contents."

"This is too creepy. If you were a guy, I'd freak. But since you're just some kind of cuddly alien like ET, I suppose I can handle it. Do you have a name?"

"You may call me Caterpillar."

"Cool! Did you know — "

" — that is the title of a song by your favorite musical group? Yes, of course."

Erin was beginning to relax a bit. The situation was improbable and spooky, but countless movies, videogames and television shows had prepared her for just such a visit. So far, there had been no bad fallout from her contact with this creature. All she had gotten was the hairdo she had perpetually longed for.

That thought raised another. "What happened to my real hair?"

"I ingested it, to replenish myself after my arduous crawl to land. I assumed you would not require your original hair for cosmetic purposes as long as we were bonded."

That last word gave Erin a chill. "Are you going to use me like a puppet now or something?"

"Not unless I have to in the course of my mission."

"And what might that be?"

"I intend to Europaform your planet."

5.

Jupiter Crash

This last statement from Caterpillar did not reassure Erin. "What do you mean? You're gonna make the whole world look like Europe? Will we all have to listen to French accordion music or German polkas? What about the food? I am *not* eating snails!"

Caterpillar's voice grew irritated. "You are confused. I am referring to my homeworld, Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter."

"You're planning to give Earth some kind of makeover so it looks like your moon? Why?"

"Perhaps you recall several years ago the collision of Comet Shoemaker-Levy with our primary?"

"Hel-Lo! Do I look like some kind of poindexter to you? Why would I *ever* have paid any attention to such a thing when I was like ten years old and still playing with *Barbie* dolls?"

"Allow me to provide a video summary then."

A vivid waking dream instantly filled Erin's vision, as if a movie screen had been pasted to her eyeballs. Her vantage was a point in near orbit around the titanic mottled globe of Jupiter. As she stared in fascination at the immense fantastic landscape of the gas giant, Comet Shoemaker-Levy flashed into the scene, shortly thereafter impacting cataclysmically with the big planet.

Control of her vision returned. "Wow! Some fireworks!"

"Indeed. My race became very alarmed at this event. Despite living beneath two miles of ice on a separate globe, we realized that we were not safe from any future such events. We needed to develop a second habitat for our kind. But the choice of your world was also determined by an additional factor."

"What was that?"

"We became aware through monitored radio broadcasts that your

national space agency was developing plans to send a probe to our world, to drill through our holy ceiling of protective ice and penetrate our happy seas. This we could not allow. So I was sent alone in a one-way interplanetary ice-pod to effect the sterilization of your planet."

Erin could not repress a guffaw. "Not to put you down, Caterpillar, but how is a lone talking ragmop going to conquer a whole world? Especially when you're attached to me? Do you have any idea how powerless teenage girls like me are in this country?"

"Powerless? Did you not render the Backstreet Boys millionaires?"

"Eeyeuw! Believe me, I had *nothing* to do with *that*!"

"No matter. My plan will soon become apparent, once we reach your house, which I intend to use as my world-converting headquarters."

Erin crossed her arms defiantly across her chest. "And what if I just plant myself here and won't budge?"

"Alas, that is when I find myself with the unpleasant necessity of taking control of your motor functions."

And with that statement, Erin found herself trotting confidently across the beach much against her will, heading straight for home.

"Oh, no! Stop right now!"

"Am I overtaxing your body?"

"No, but I hate running! It's like gym class — you get all *sweaty*!"

"Perspiration is good. I will extend portions of myself to absorb it for my sustenance if you permit."

"No, no! I'll sweat, I'll sweat!"

6.

Fascination Street

While she jogged helplessly home, Erin was treated to another personal screening of an educational filmstrip. This time the experience included multisensory stimulation as well. It was frightening to realize that she was galloping blind and deaf through the however lightly trafficked night streets of her town. But Erin had to assume the Caterpillar knew what it was doing.

Erin was a swimmer in the lightless, tasty, echoic seas of Europa.

Despite the lack of sunshine, she could somehow perceive in full color a wild ecology. Teeming with garish and bizarre alien lifeforms, both mobile and sessile, dotted with smoking volcanic-vent oases, the homeworld of Caterpillar seemed a cheerful industrious place. Erin witnessed many of Caterpillar's fellows swim by. A few moved independently with a scalp-flexing maneuver, but most rode a variety of host creatures, from long sleek sharklike beings to bloated floaters. Erin assumed that the other Caterpillars controlled their mounts just as she herself was now being ridden.

Closer and closer to a heavenly dome — dimly sensed at first, then more and more vivid — Erin swam, the pleasantly warm waters sluicing by. Finally the jagged, faintly luminescent underside of the miles of ice that enclosed the European biosphere loomed above her. Erin felt her soul fill with a deep religious appreciation of this miracle shield that allowed her world to exist. It felt like attending Christmas and Easter services rolled into one.

Europa vanished, and apprehension of her immediate surroundings returned. She was almost home.

"You see now why we could never allow Earthlings to sacrilegiously penetrate our icy mantle. And once your own planet is encased in a similar crust, any of your species lucky enough to adapt and survive will certainly thank us for allowing you to share such a blessing."

"We're a very ungrateful bunch of bastards."

"No matter. We are highly altruistic, enough to compensate for your bad manners."

Erin came to a stop on her doorstep.

"If I restore control to you, will you promise not to run away?"

Erin sighed. "All right. I don't have anywhere else to go anyway. I'm certainly not going to walk into a police station and announce that my hair wants to be taken to our leader."

"I do not care about your leaders. They are irrelevant."

Erin chuckled. "You're here only an hour and already you sound like talk radio."

"We have learned much from your unwise profligate broadcasting."

The front door swung open, and Erin's mother stood framed within.

A bit taller still than her rebellious adolescent offspring, Anne

Merkin shared Erin's stubborn round face, engraved with age-accumulated worry-lines. Her gray-streaked hair was bound up in a banana clip, a few tendrils escaping. Did they stir with impossible sympathy toward Erin's new do? No, it was only the play of shadows.

Dressed in robe and slippers, Anne wore an expression that any parent would have recognized instantly: a blend of concern, anger and puzzlement.

"What are you doing out at this hour, young lady? And why didn't you — My god, what have you done to your hair!"

"Mom, can we not have this discussion in the front yard, please?"

Anne Merkin grabbed her daughter by the shoulder and pulled her inside. The slam of the door was followed by the start of a rant.

"You look like a savage! Your father must be rolling in his grave! To think of all the care and love we've both lavished on you. But you don't appreciate anything, do you? I've never seen a more ungrateful child! Well, this is the last straw! I'm calling your Aunt Gladys right now!"

"Who is Aunt Gladys?" asked Caterpillar.

"She's my mother's sister, a real bitch. She lives way out in the country. I'll probably be locked in my bedroom there for a week. But they'll probably try to shave my 'hair' off first."

Erin's second scalp crawled in revulsion. "This cannot be!"

Anne Merkin was dialing the phone. "Quit your mumbling, young lady!"

A long extrusion of Anne's new hair shot out and wrapped itself around Anne Merkin's neck.

"Urk!"

"Don't choke her, Caterpillar! You'll kill her!"

Like a stack of poker chips flicked with a finger, Anne Merkin dropped unconscious to the linoleum at the same time that Caterpillar replied. "I merely needed to discommode her long enough to gain control of her sleep centers. Circuits are locked in a feedback loop now, and she will remain unaware until I choose to awaken her."

Erin's hair reeled itself in. The dangling phone played a message of operator annoyance, and Erin absentmindedly recradled it. She moved to her mother's side, arranging her limbs more naturally. Fetching a pillow

and afghan from the parlor, she made the sleeper as comfortable as possible. Caterpillar did not interfere until she was finished.

"Very well. Now we must get to work."

7.

Jumping Someone Else's Train

The time was now after midnight. Quiet as the interval between tracks on a CD, the neighborhood — including of course Anne Merkin— slept peacefully, unaware of the coming planetary doom being birthed beneath Erin's fingers.

Erin's hands had apparently developed skills and a mind of their own. She found herself watching in bemusement as they began to do the kind of things that gearhead boys liked to do with cars. With several tools no more complex than a kitchen knife, a pair of tweezers, a Gameboy and, ironically, a handheld hair dryer, Erin's hands began to assemble a strange mechanism.

First she watched her familiar digits, each chewed nail enameled in flaking Ghetto Grit, deconstruct the Merkins' television, radio, VCR, microwave and Waterpik into a junkheap of parts spread across the parlor floor. Then she marveled as Caterpillar, using her personal limbs like waldoes, began to put the components together according to distinctly non-human rules. Erin had never imagined that the nozzle of a Waterpik might possibly funnel microwaves, but such seemed to be Caterpillar's intent.

After the first hour of this painstaking work, Erin began to grow bored and uncomfortable.

"Hey, Caterpiggie! Can't I change the way I'm sitting? My legs feel like they're gonna fall off!"

"Sorry. Allow me to reconfigure your badly engineered circulatory channels and remove all discomfort."

Without shifting position, Erin suddenly felt wonderful. "Gee, thanks!" This attention to her commandeered body raised a parallel question in her mind. "How come you can survive in our atmosphere? Why aren't you flopping around like a fish out of water?"

"My race is basically anaerobic. Our metabolisms can get by without oxygen, although we can toggle into several other modes as well. I must admit, though, that the dryness of your atmosphere is distressing to me."

"Are you asking me to go soak my head?"

"Later, perhaps. Now the work must continue."

Half a dismal hour passed. Erin found herself pondering another puzzling question. "Do you guys have machines and stuff like this on Europa? I didn't see any in your home movies."

"No, we are a non-technological culture, employing direct mental control of universal forces. You see, the cosmic roiling in the spacetime continuum created by the electromagnetic-gravitic plasma-dance amongst Jupiter and its satellites allows us to access certain energies directly. We evolved naturally to manipulate forces which you lower orders have little conception of. Here on your cold planet, however, I have to resort to cruder methods, plucked directly from your memories."

"What are you talking about? I don't know any of this electronics shit."

"So you believe."

Erin was left to ponder the implications of this statement while Caterpillar continued his work. Eventually, she found herself dozing off in a natural manner, despite her busy eyes remaining wide open in order to continue guiding her darting hands.

When she regained awareness, several hours had slipped by. Her hands were cradling the Gameboy, which was cabled to the softly glowing asymmetrical mess of jiggered parts. The screen of the video game displayed a welter of scrolling alien icons.

"I need several more components not available in your domicile. We shall have to visit a military base."

This bland statement was the most insane thing Erin had heard since the Caterpillar had attached itself to her, and its absurdity set her off.

"Are you absolutely bugshit? I'd be shot on sight!"

Caterpillar remained unperturbed. "I think otherwise. You see, in the course of my investigations of your mentality, I have discovered certain latent untapped potentials in your brain which will make our task fairly straightforward. It seems that your race, in partial compensation for your unfortunate choice of birthplaces, has evolved so as to be able to take advantage spontaneously and irregularly of certain loopholes among the

physical laws. Nonlocal actions, extratemporal sensing and other seemingly freakish abilities not available to more sophisticated beings like me are open to your race. I simply propose to put these talents under my direct and precise control."

"I still don't see what all this guff means for me."

"Only this. Please concentrate on the nearest military base you know of."

Obligingly, Erin summoned up a picture of Fort Vandermeer, where her dad had once done his National Guard duty. She pictured the main parade grounds where she had once strolled, hand in hand with her father.

Pre-dawn illumination tinged the frosty sky above the barracks. Gravel crunched under Erin's boots as she pivoted incredulously. The only figure in sight was a guard at the gate facing quite rationally outward, toward potential invaders. In the chilly silence, Erin distinctly heard the guard cough twice.

"Holy — "

Caterpillar cut her off. "Quiet! Now, I would ajudge that windowless structure a warehouse — "

The interior of the barnlike shed was quite dark. But suddenly Erin found that she could see, if only in black and white.

Caterpillar directed the girl up and down a number of aisles. Soon, her arms were loaded with hardware.

The next second she stood again in her parlor. Gratefully, she dumped her burdens to the floor.

Picking up a GPS unit with Erin's hands, Caterpillar said, "The fastenings on this unit are non-standard. Let us visit a hardware store."

Having done so well with her first jump, the prospect of teleporting a second time seemed more agreeable to Erin. "Could we maybe stop for some food too? There's no chocolate in the house at all!"

Erin paid close attention to what Caterpillar did next with her mind.

8.

The Lovecats

Fueled by a dozen Kit Kat bars liberated from the locked but hardly impregnable-to-teleporters grocery store, Erin labored long hours under

Caterpillar's behest. As the morning progressed, sunlight gradually flooding the parlor and revealing all the weirdness with a level of detail that the night had half-concealed, Erin could feel herself growing sweatier and grosser by the minute. The Caterpillar's unceasing construction of its looming Doomsday Device required Erin to be in constant motion: climbing up and down chairs, crawling under projecting shelves of circuits, bending into odd-shaped cavities. Combined with the jog home from the beach, this activity left her grottier than young Patti Smith's armpits. Adolescent musk rose off her in powerful waves. Almost as strong as the desire to get clean was the craving for a bidi.

"Caterpillar, I need a break!"

"Are you experiencing any aches?"

Erin inventoried her muscles. Curiously, they did not feel fatigued.

"No. But I have to take a shower before I make myself faint!"

"I too would like to immerse myself in the second-rate yet potentially refreshing waters of your world. But its conversion to European parameters must be initiated first. My whole race is depending on me."

"Yeah, well, I never signed up for this little chore."

"Did you not extend the gullible hand of interplanetary friendship to me on the beach and invite me onboard?"

Erin paused. "Well, maybe I kinda did.... But that was before I knew about your evil plans!"

"What do you care about the fate of your globe? Do not attempt to persuade me of your nonexistent charity toward all mankind. Recall that I have access to your memories. You often wished the world would explode and end your so-called 'suffering.'"

"I — I was just being melodramatic! I didn't mean anybody any real harm! I just got pissed when narrowminded jerks said stupid things. Like during the Gulf War when I was little, and all anyone could talk about was killing an Arab!"

"Nonetheless, you should be glad that the pitiful charade of human existence is about to be transmogrified."

Erin tried to teleport out of her house to the police station, but nothing happened. Apparently, the function remained under Caterpillar's control. Instead, she found herself stepping will-lessly back from the alien machine. The Gameboy was still cabled to the bigger contraption, and

now Erin's fingers danced across the controls, causing a parade of portentous icons to march across the display.

"Now the door to the Funhouse is open."

A liquid platinum lambency filled one irregular cavity of the machine, and the next second something popped out.

The creature that emerged resembled ball lightning or a swamp-gas will-o-the-wisp, a sparky, fuzzy roil of energy — except that it appeared to possess infinite depths filled with churning hazy images. Erin thought she could see a kind of Cheshire Cat face surface, melt, then surface again, time after time. Erin sensed a kind of playful curiosity, a joy and élan radiate from the vital creature. As if reciprocating her attention, the being began to "purr" on some subliminal yet detectable level.

"What — what is it?"

"This is an intelligent creature composed entirely of what your scientists have just recently begun to call 'funny energy.' It originates out of the very substrate of the universe, from below the Planck level. We have often employed them usefully as assistants, for they are able to manipulate matter directly at the quantum level."

Suddenly a second creature — Erin found herself thinking of them as "Lovecats" — blipped into the parlor. This Lovecat did not linger with the original, but shot off, straight through the house's walls without damaging them!

Now a steady stream of Lovecats began to emerge, all darting off in different directions. Only the first, the Master Lovecat, remained behind.

"He will serve as a relay between the machine and his flock," Caterpillar said.

"What are they going to do?"

"I have set them multiple tasks. First they are going to increase the albedo — the reflectivity — of your polar ice caps. This will start the chilling of your globe, as more and more solar radiance is returned to space. Then the Lovecats, as you name them, will attend to other changes involving carbon-sequestering and such. Your damaged climate is already balanced on a needle, and only needs a slight push to plunge into the deepest Ice Age ever seen. In only a few years, your globe will be entirely frozen, a new Europa suitable for colonization by my kind. I estimate that your civilization will take approximately six months to collapse. As I earlier suggested,

however, a few humans might make the transition to the new world, if they adopt the habits and capabilities of certain marine mammals."

Now Erin felt so awful about what she had helped unleash, even her own lack of bodily hygiene or addict's clove-cravings paled in comparison.

9.

Wild Mood Swings

Throughout the long morning and into the afternoon, an endless procession of bristly, crackling, weightless Lovecats emerged from the Doomsday Machine. All Erin could do was watch in muted horror as the agents of Earth's freezeout zipped off to fulfill the Caterpillar's wicked commands. The alien seemed not to care about rest or sustenance or comfort, for either himself or his mount, but instead remained focused on the smooth workings of his gateway to the basement boiler-room of the cosmos, the Funhouse.

Erin's mind raced in tight circles. How could she escape? How could she save her planet? Would the new Ice Age possibly spare an England sustained in warmth by the Gulf Stream, and thus leave habitable the home of the adorable Robert Smith, the clone of whose hair she now sported? And finally, what was this looming planetary catastrophe going to do to her virginal love life?

Around three in the afternoon came a knock at the front door.

"Do not respond," warned the Caterpillar.

"Erin, hello! It's me, Elise! Why weren't you at school today?"

"She's got a key," Erin told Caterpillar. But this intelligence came too late to save her friend.

The door swung open directly onto the parlor. Elise stepped inside, spotted Erin, and exclaimed, "Wow, look at your hair!" before promptly vanishing.

Ten seconds later came an identical knocking on the door, which had mysteriously closed itself.

"Erin, hello! It's me, Elise! Why weren't you at school today?"

Elise entered the house, spoke her ultimate line — "Wow, look at your hair!" — and disappeared again. Ten more seconds ticked by, and the

entire scenario replayed once more.

"What have you done to Elise, you monster!"

"I have rolled up her entire existence into this short sequence of events, then set her adrift from the continuum. She is like a hoop rolling through a landscape of time, surfacing at regular intervals forever."

"Erin, hello! It's me, Elise! Why weren't you at school today? Wow, look at your hair!" "Erin, hello! It's me, Elise! Why weren't you at school today? Wow, look at your hair!" "Erin — "

"Oh, this is awful! You have to set her free! Look, the neighbors will soon spot something wrong and call the cops."

"No, they will not. They will think you girls are simply playing around, as foolish young females frequently do. In any case, the changes engineered by the Lovecats will become irreversible within the next few hours. In fact, so confident of my success am I, that I believe I will now take advantage of your offer to soak your head."

Caterpillar marched Erin past her sleeping mother, out of earshot of Elise's ceaseless litany, and into the bathroom. There, the alien compelled her to strip. Beneath Erin's black garb she wore a lace-trimmed camisole and white cotton panties, the latter garment bearing the image of Badtz-Maru, the enigmatic penguin friend of Hello Kitty. Seen by Erin in the mirror, the gloomy bird seemed to proclaim, Finally, Earth will become a world fit for penguins!

Completely naked the next minute, Erin was forced to contemplate herself in the full-length mirror, a task she generally avoided. Oh, God, why couldn't she be built like Xena? Maybe then she'd be able to save the world....

Caterpillar disdained to close the shower curtain before setting only the cold water gushing from the lower tap. The twist of a valve set the frigid spray pouring out the shower nozzle and directly onto her head. For a brief moment, Erin felt encased in ice. Then she experienced the bitterly cold flow as pure pleasure.

"Ah, if only there were more sulphur in this pale fluid, I would be completely at home!"

Erin decided to make the best of this experience and get clean. On a hanging wire rack stood several plastic bottles: shampoo, creme rinse, pre-rinse, after-rinse, and half-a-dozen other hair condiments. Although Erin had hated her old locks, she had taken scrupulous care of them. No sense

being grotty just to spite her Mom. Now she reached instinctively for a bottle, but found her hand halted.

"What are those?"

"Just soaps."

"Ah, cleansing agents. We do not have these on Europa. Very well. Proceed."

Erin squirted her alien hair full of pearly aromatic liquid and began to work it in.

A strange feeling of disorientation passed through her. Then Caterpillar began to chant.

"Oh, the bliss! Oh, the joy! Sweet heavenly scents! Marvelous compounds! My veins thrill with ambrosia! More, more, more!"

Like a crazed beautician, Erin dosed Caterpillar with six kinds of hair preparations. His chanting turned to ecstatic gibberish.

Experimentally, Erin reached out and turned off the water. Nothing stopped her. She stepped freely from the tub. Caterpillar continued to moan and croon. Erin grabbed a spraycan of mousse and covered Caterpillar with it, sealing the intoxicating chemicals beneath a layer of stiffening goo, much as Caterpillar had wanted to cordon off the earth.

Regarding herself in the mirror, Erin saw, on one level of perception, a teenaged living mess: skin blue and goosepimpled, hair crusted over.

But on another level, Xena herself looked back.

In his delirium, Caterpillar had plundered her memories and emerged with a snatch of a Cure song. Now the alien sang over and over in its androgynous contralto a snatch of Smithian lyrics:

"Show me, show me, show me how you do that trick! The one that makes me scream, 'She's sick!' And I promise you, I promise that I'll run away with you!"

Erin smiled. "Oh, don't you worry, Mr. Badass Sea Slug. I'll show you a trick or two!"

10.

Gone!

The Master Lovecat wasn't a bad guy at all once you got to know him. Frisky and curious, amorally cooperative, the energy creature summoned

from the warp and weft of the plenum wanted nothing more than to please anyone who exhibited a token friendship by inviting Lovecats up the scales of the multiverse into the macroverse.

It had taken Erin more than an hour to establish efficient communications with Lovecat Number One. (She still wasn't sure whether the scattered horde of beings shared one identity or many.) She certainly wasn't aided by the background roar of raving nonsense the Caterpillar kept chattering into her auditory nerves. Strange physical sensations — itches, bad tastes, dizziness — plagued her as well. But by mentally tweaking her newly talented brain (Erin pictured the operation as adjusting slider controls on a boombox), she managed to lower the buzz and random stimuli from the alien, but not completely eliminate it. That was just as well, she figured, since she had to keep monitoring the European to make sure of its intoxication levels.

By sheer persistence, Erin had eventually broken through the language barrier to send and receive information to and from the Master Lovecat. Not that language was precisely the word. Unlike Caterpillar, the Lovecat seemed to communicate by pictures and feelings and gestaltic lumps. Talking to it was more like trying to manage a directed dream. But after many frustrating minutes, during which Erin counseled herself not to freak because like all of Earth was counting on her, she finally felt that the two of them understood each other.

So, taking a deep breath, Erin ordered the Master Lovecat to reverse the climatological changes initiated by the Caterpillar.

Done, she thought she heard/felt/remembered.

Erin expelled a gust of held air. "Whew!"

"Erin, hello! It's me, Elise! Why weren't you at school today? Wow, look at your hair!" "Erin, hello! It's me, Elise! Why weren't you at school today? Wow, look at your hair!" "Erin — "

Continually cycling through time, popping in and out of Erin's perceptions like a skipping film, Elise had been an annoying subliminal midge-drone while Erin concentrated on saving mankind's ungrateful, ignorant but irreplaceable ass. Now, however, Erin felt she could spare a moment to rescue her friend.

Digging mental fingers into an unnatural n-dimensional knot she sensed around the front door, Erin untied Elise's contorted lifeline.

"Erin! Where are your clothes!"

Clothes? Who could bother with clothes now? Did Xena stop fighting if she busted a bra-strap?

"I'll explain later." Erin suddenly considered the plight of the third human in the room. She teleported over to her mother, touched her shoulder, probed inside, and woke Anne Merkin up.

Mrs. Merkin gazed up at the ceiling. Her brain seemed to be lagging behind her eyes. "How did I get here?"

"No time to talk now! I've got to fix my hair's little red wagon so we're never bothered by it again!"

Erin transmitted the concept of a soft warm blanket to the Master Lovecat, who was busy reabsorbing all his scattered task-finished minions back into himself.

Protect me, she pleaded.

She stepped sidewise across 480 million miles of space.

11.

Hot Hot Hot!!!

Jupiter's glow reflected colorfully from Erin's nose jewelry, like Christmas lights in a silver ornament. Cocooned in a glowing transparent nimbus, the Master Lovecat hovering at her shoulder, the nude girl regarded Europa, the snowball home of the aggressive Caterpillars.

Atop her head, the mousse-encapsulated, balsam-besotted alien seemed laboriously to take cognizance of its altered surroundings.

"Where — are — we? Home? How — ?"

"Shut up! I'm going to make sure you guys never mess with my world again!"

"No! What — what are you planning?"

"Oh, you'll see!"

Erin felt the Caterpillar strive to regain control of her mind. But she was too strong for it now, at least in its attenuated state. The alien was reduced to pleading.

"Please! Visit my world! You'll see then. We don't deserve whatever doom you intend!"

"All right! But no funny stuff!"

Erin reappeared under miles of European ice. Her eyes adjusted themselves to the level of illumination. Here in reality was the watery world she had seen from Caterpillar's mental filmstrip.

Within minutes, she was surrounded by many of Caterpillar's peers all mounted on their various steeds. They could not speak to her directly, but she sensed their unease and abject surrender. They were more pathetic than a bunch of middle-schoolers.

"Oh, damn! What a bunch of lameoids! All right, you've convinced me! Here, you can join your friends!"

Erin psychically transported Caterpillar off her head — Ow! those sharp feet! — out of her protective force-shell and into the welcoming sea. The water dissolved the hallucinatory rinses and shampoos off Caterpillar, and through some fading quantum thread of connection she heard the alien's familiar nasty voice exclaim, "We'll be back! And when you don't have the Lovecats with you — !"

Erin smiled. "Right." Then she popped out into space again, close to Europa, where, with a little generous help from the Lovecats, she pushed the satellite out of its orbit, just as effortlessly as her father had once impelled her on a swing.

The titanic splash the moon made in Jupiter's atmosphere, photographed by a startled but quick-thinking astronomer at the controls of the Hubble telescope, was destined to become the best-selling poster of the next five decades.

12.

Just Like Heaven

Erin's chestnut-colored hair hung long and lush to the shoulders of her new black leather jacket. At eight P.M. on a beautiful summer's Friday night, she stood in an extensively winding line with Elise outside their hometown civic center. The two girls could barely control themselves. Puffing on bidis, bouncing with anticipation, breaking into spontaneous broad smiles, they advanced slowly with the other ticket-holders. To pass the time, they debated possible set-lists.

"'Friday I'm in Love!'"

"'Mint Car!'"

"'Wendy Time!'"

"'Pictures of You!'"

"'Close to Me!'"

Once inside the auditorium, they rushed to their reserved front-row-center seats. Even the grungy techies moving equipment around on the impossibly close stage looked to their eyes like the glamorous priests of an exotic cult.

"Oh, Erin! It's like a dream come true! Remember this winter, when you were feeling so down and you like went mental and destroyed all your appliances and ripped out your hair and started sleep-walking around naked until you snapped out of it? Who would've ever guessed that a few months later we'd be sitting right here? It just goes to show that whenever you think you're stuck, something will come along to unstuck you!"

"You are so right, Elise!"

The lights went down, and the opening act came on. Elise whispered, "Do you think we'll get to go onstage? That would be the ultimate!"

"I can't say," Erin replied, and she really couldn't.

She had pulled a lot of tricks to get the Cure here and secure these tickets. Teleporting into the record company's offices and jiggering their computers had been the easiest part of it. But for the moment she was finished with trickery.

If she did get called up tonight to stand onstage in front of thousands of admiring eyes with her favorite band in the world, it was going to be strictly because of who she was!





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, by Stephen King, Scribner, 2000, \$25.

Secret Windows: Essays and Fiction on the Craft of Writing, by Stephen King, Book-of-the-Month Club, 2000, \$18.75.

IF *ON Writing* were only a "how to" book, I wouldn't recommend it as readily as I do, although, according to statistics, one out of every three readers in our genre wants to be a writer, so a lot of you would probably find it useful if that's all it were. But King has bookended the "how to" portion of the book with sections of autobiography that almost everyone will find fascinating.

The front section deals with his growing up, and after reading about incidents like the fat babysitter who used to sit on him and fart in his face, it doesn't take

you long to see why the characters in some of King's books can be as over-the-top as they are. It also gives you new insight into just how hard King had to work merely to get a book published, never mind to get to where he is today.

And even success had its pitfalls — one only has to turn to the section where King details his fall into alcohol and drug addiction. As Fred Eaglesmith says in his song "Alcohol & Pills": "You think they might have been happy with the glory and the fame/but fame doesn't take away the pain, it just pays the bills." Rich doesn't automatically mean happy.

The closing section deals with King's horrendous car accident in the summer of 1999 and shows that King can be as gripping a non-fiction writer as he is when he's writing fiction.

But it's the central section that's the meat and potatoes of this book, and I think even readers uninterested in becoming writers will

find it of interest. For new writers, it's indispensable, and I know it's going to join my very short list of recommended books for writers which, so far, has only contained *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White.

Keeping in mind that there is no correct way to write, there's only what works for you, King's advice in this section should still prove useful. Perhaps I say that because his methodology eerily twins my own (though I don't write as fast), but even then there are some differences. For instance, I tend to do my research before I start a project. But having seen eyes light up at workshops when I've told aspiring writers some of the things I've found that work — advice that King repeats here — I don't doubt that this book will do the same for many would-be writers reading it. And if you come away with only one or two things to make your writing life easier and more productive, I think they'll be worth the price of admission.

What you won't find here are blueprints, or a magic formula, to writing the perfect book. As Candace Jane Dorsey said in a recent *Locus* interview, "You don't have to learn how to write a novel; you learn how to write the one you're writing."

Each one is different. But there are common pitfalls to avoid (such as the overuse of adverbs, and unnecessary and/or awkward dialogue attribution) and King covers most of them in here.

This is the best "how to" book I've run across to date and combined with the Strunk and White, and lots of reading and practice, it will help any aspiring writer put the words down on paper in a manner that will make them a pleasure for others to read.

And for those of you who want more, the Book-of-the-Month Club has issued *Secret Windows*, a companion collection to *On Writing*. Unfortunately, you have to be a Club member to buy a copy. Now while I don't agree with the marketing strategy of certain items only being available from specific stores or outlets (the worst recent example being Steve Earle's *Transcendental Blues*, which, besides the regular CD, came in five other different versions, each of which could only be purchased at Borders, Warehouse, etc.), at least it's not hard for interested readers to join the book club to get a copy.

The question is, do you want it?

Secret Windows comes off as a rather hastily cobbled-together affair

made up of interviews, articles, introductions King has written, bits of fiction, and transcriptions of speeches. The material itself is good — my picayune objection is only in the presentation. There's no real flow from piece to piece, and there's often repetition of themes and statement. This can be excused, I suppose, since the material is taken from throughout King's career, and certainly shows a consistency in his thinking and writing habits.

The die-hard King reader will have seen much of this before, particularly the 160-page extract from *Danse Macabre*, but it's still good to have it all in one place — much of it never reprinted until now. We also get a couple of the very early stories that King wrote about in *On Writing*, an illuminating introduction by Peter Straub, and other rare tidbits and treats. *Secret Windows* pales when measured up to that companion volume, but it's still a fine and revealing collection, and a worthy addition to any King aficionado's library.

My recommendation: read it in small bits, rather than all at once.

Batman: Harvest Breed, by George Pratt, DC Comics, 2000, \$24.95.

The House on the Borderland, adapted by Richard Corben, Simon Revelstoke, & Lee Loughridge, DC Comics, 2000, \$29.95.

I'm a comic book reader from way back, but except for a rare few (*Strangers in Paradise* and *Kabuki* come most immediately to mind), I'm not a big fan of the long-running series, particularly those featuring costumed superheroes. That said, I have to admit a certain fondness for Batman, a "superhero" more along the lines of Sherlock Holmes or Doc Savage, with a keen, reasoning mind as well as gymnastic skill. (I'm conveniently ignoring the campy versions that have appeared over the years in print and on TV and the silver screen.)

Still, I don't read Batman comics either, except for the odd special publication such as the book under discussion here. What I like best about this sort of story is that it doesn't fit into some desperately held continuity, but ranges as far and wide (or as deep into the character's mind) as the story necessitates. Batman is always at his best when shown driven by his personal demons, and George Pratt does an admirable job portraying those obsessions in *Harvest Breed*, conveying emotion and turmoil as

much with his expressive art as through the captions and dialogue.

And what art it is. Anyone familiar with his award-winning book *Enemy Ace: War Idyll* will immediately understand my enthusiasm for Pratt's work. If you're not, you at least owe it to yourself to flip through this book in your local comic shop or book store. The art ranges from loose, painterly panels to those with eloquent linework that stands out bold and sharp against washes of color, all tied together with a stylistic coherence and a master storyteller's skill.

It's a dark, grim story, with Batman trying to track down a serial killer that soon involves him with voodoo and Vietnamese witches, but it's marvelously told. And while Pratt certainly has an individual style, it's eminently suited to the story he's telling here.

Richard Corben is another idiosyncratic artist with an immediately recognizable style, probably most familiar to the casual reader from his work for *Heavy Metal*. It's not necessarily to everyone's taste, and definitely cartoony when compared to Pratt, but Corben still has a wonderful sense of design and a bold style that works more often than it doesn't.

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It certainly works here in this retelling of William Hope Hodgson's classic novel *The House on the Borderland*, as adapted by Simon Revelstoke. All the sly, mounting horror is maintained from the original — a tough trick to pull off, especially in a visual medium.

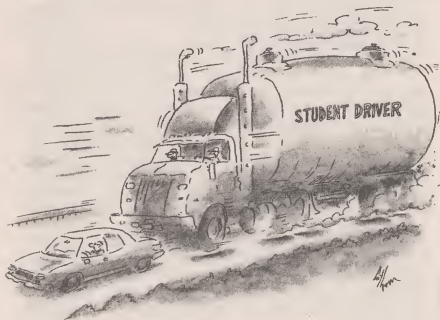
I suppose my only disappointment with this book isn't so much the version in hand, as the fact that I never see Hodgson's original novel in the bookstores anymore, and if readers don't see it, they're unlikely to buy it. A quick check online while writing this in December 2000 tells me that there is a 1996

mass market edition from Carroll & Graf available, so at least it's still in print, but *The House on the Borderland* deserves to be read by each new generation of readers that comes along. Hopefully this illustrated version will lead some readers back to the original text upon which it's based.

All of which sounds like a back-handed compliment to this graphic novel, and I don't mean it to be. I just feel that adaptations of books — be they film or illustrated ver-

sions such as this — are never as good as the actual books upon which they're based. They can be intriguing, and entertaining, interpretations such as this one certainly is, but no visual rendition can ever quite match the movie that unfolds in our heads as we're reading.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞





BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Going, Going, Gone by Jack Womack, Grove Press, 2001, \$24.

Zeitgeist by Bruce Sterling, Bantam Spectra, 2000, \$24.95

AS I WRITE, the strangest presidential election in U.S. history remains bizarrely unresolved — the politicians still sniping, the candidates in court, the ballot counters blearily studying the dimples that could be the difference. Whoever prevails — and by the time you're reading this, someone surely has — they will have done so by a margin of several hundred votes in the state of Florida, an absurdly tiny percentage of the total votes cast.

It's an appropriately silly end to what may have been the most grotesque campaign season we've ever seen. It was a veritable feast for cynics, as minority voices (Nader and Buchanan) and substantive issues were swept off the public stage,

leaving the two frontrunners to belabor their fractional differences. To the weary voter's eye it seemed clear that neither a Gore nor a Bush victory would signal anything so much as business as usual; hence one of the narrowest margins in our nation's history.

There could hardly be a more perfect backdrop for reading Jack Womack. In his "Dryco" series — beginning with his first novel, *Ambient*, in 1987 — all of today's dire trends have maximized futureward. Corporations like Dryco own their employees; the income gap has widened to a canyon; the environment has gone to hell; and everyday violence outdoes the bloodiest *Death Wish* flick. Dryco controls the president, and the United States pursues a constant low-level war with Russia in order to ensure a healthy economy. It seemed close enough to home when *Ambient* first appeared; today, it's not hard to believe that we're just a stock market

crash away from Womackville.

Going, Going, Gone is his latest, the sixth and final volume of the "Dryco" series. And it's a kick. Womack slides his compact, playful, sardonic prose past the reading eye, sequinning his narrative with wry observations and a peculiar vocabulary, and rendering with exquisite economy a world so nearly our own (though not) that it's more meaningful than the one we inhabit. *Going, Going, Gone* mutes its sf armature, preferring the subtle to the spectacular, but it delivers the double-take brain thrill that true lovers of the form crave. "What's television?" asks our narrator, Walter Bullitt, for in his New York, circa 1968, many things are the same, but the boob tube never bloomed.

Bullitt works as a freelance contractor for shady government agencies. He specializes in psychoactive substances, performing experiments on himself and an uninformed public — "acts of chemical interference in the national interest," as he styles it. His glass-smooth affect shows little sign of qualm, but Bullitt's arrangement is precarious, because he and his main handler, Martin, have trace elements of black ancestry in their bloodlines, and in this other 1968,

that's a compromising problem of immense magnitude. Bullitt also operates with little or nothing in terms of cash reserves, so when his employers request his assistance in disrupting the nascent presidential bid of Robert Kennedy, it doesn't take very long for Bullitt's resistance to crack under a starve-out siege. It's this job or none, and so Bullitt uses a common obsession with classic 78-rpm recordings to launch a Trojan Horse friendship with Bobby K's ne'er-do-well brother, Jim.

In the meantime, though, Bullitt's life has been invaded by two disturbing presences: a pair of ghosts calling for help but answering no questions, and two unusually dangerous ladies from across the barrier between worlds. Eulie and Chlojo come from the bleak and violent Dryco stream, and they need Bullitt's help in solving the mystery of his ghosts, in order to prevent some sort of interdimensional catastrophe. It takes no special genius to guess that this combination of forces spells the end of Bullitt's comfortably edgy lifestyle.

There's not a lot more to the plot of *Going, Going, Gone*, but that's just fine, and to be expected. Womack novels don't live or die on

narrative twists and turns — he uses plot like a coat hanger, support for what matters more: the texture and odor of his imagined worlds, the thoughts and linguistic tics of his characters. He uses his sf elements much the same way. One doesn't turn to Womack for extended "what-if" thought experiments. The dark and violent future, the parallel alt-history timestreams, and even some of the details (such as the Dryco world's Church of Elvis) will be familiar stonework to sf readers. It's not so much *what* Womack imagines as *how* he imagines it, and how he conveys it. More than any other sf writer active today, he relies on quirks of prose as much as odd details to generate a sense of otherness and futurity. "Museumwear," Eulie says of his record collection. "Populacra." This is the way they speak in Drycoland.

Womack takes his prose play to new heights in *Going, Going, Gone*. Not only do we get the futurespeak of Dryco, but the narrator Bullitt's own hepcat *patois* shimmies and shivers in nearly every sentence. "The hens gave my place the deadpan, looking like cottillion debbs at an Irish wake," Bullitt tells us as he brings Eulie and Chlojo back to his none-too-chic pad. Bullitt's peculiar diction doesn't

indicate anything about the alternate world he lives in, though — even his contemporaries often find his speech befuddling. "Poor missy looked like she'd been hit over the head with a duck," he says of a gal who can't glom to his badinage. But it does seem to have something in common with the lingo of the clandestine government agencies with which Bullitt works — most of his contacts from that crowd speak in cryptic, contorted phrases, as though their covert habits have warped their brains.

In one sense this makes *Going, Going, Gone* an odd finish to the Dryco series. All the previous volumes were set in or featured narrators from the Dryco future, and the linguistic habits of that world stood in marked contrast to the speech of the parallel world Dryco's agents entered. The focus is further off the ultraviolence in this book, too, though the occasional eruption bursts through. But in another sense this sixth book makes a fitting culmination, as over the course of the series Womack has brought the twists of prose further and further into the foreground. In the previous volume, *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*, we watched through a girl's diary as the world collapsed around her and she did a time-lapse

Jekyll and Hyde, from quiet private school girl to hair-trigger street fighter, and we perceived the transformation as much in how Lola spoke as in what she did. In *Going, Going, Gone*, Womack gives us another supremely idiosyncratic narrative voice, but the effect is much the opposite: Bullitt celebrates the endlessly generative power of language, reveling in every opportunity to substitute colorful metaphor for straight-on blandness. His playful verbosity presents a potent contrast to the clipped and stripped corpspeak of Dryco, in much the same way as the baroque speech of the Ambients did in the first volume.

So sweet and hypnotic is Bullitt's voice that you don't want to read *Going, Going, Gone* in little snippets, on the subway or for fifteen minutes before falling asleep. This is prose you can sink into like a warm bath, and if you give it long enough you can no longer tell where your skin ends and the water begins. See if you don't start thinking in strangely twisted figurative phrases yourself after you've read it. Me, I haven't been able to shake the pleasant tingle of the phrase "to open the savoury bivalve" — I keep playing it through my head as I drive to work. No, I'm not going to

tell you what it means — go read the book.

Still, there's no completely escaping the end-of-series blues, and not merely the sort that comes from knowing that a beloved pal has stopped by for her last visit. Womack grooves deeply on Bullitt's otherweird 1968, and while the action is centered there, *Going, Going, Gone* croons heartstoppingly well. When the scenery shifts to Drycoland for the big wrap-up, the energy drops some — seeing loose ends tied rarely fascinates as much as watching them spun. That problem didn't strike Womack's previous novel, the unrelated *Let's Put the Future Behind Us*, freed as it was from the need to intertwine with earlier work. At its best, *Going, Going, Gone* upsweeps the reader into an hypnotic dreamland, wafted on Bullitt's psychedelic patter, and it leaves us hungering to see what Womack will gift us with next.

Zeitgeist. It's the kind of title that would scare me away, promising more than it can hope to deliver, but it's by Bruce Sterling, who is one of the few among us capable of living up to it. Particularly in the wake of his previous novel, *Distraction*, which captured certain

aspects of the spirit of our times so very well, I opened Sterling's latest offering full of confidence that he'd deliver the goods.

And he does. Like Womack's novel, *Zeitgeist* presents to us a warped world that's ninety percent our own, while the other ten percent exaggerates or distorts certain factors, the parts we should be paying attention to. As it departs from the reality we know, it helps us know it better.

As with *Going, Going, Gone*, the plot isn't the important thing in *Zeitgeist*. It's a framework, a skeleton upon which to hang flesh. Sterling opens with Leggy Starlitz, international hustler extraordinaire, energetically flogging his latest commercial scam à la 1999: the pop band G-7, composed of seven utterly untalented girls from seven different countries — the U.S., Britain, France, Japan, Italy, Germany, and Canada. Indeed, so unimportant are their individual personalities that they are known simply by the nationalities they represent — the French One, the German One, the American One.

Starlitz's magic lies in his ability to cut to the core of the matter, to reduce a strategy or a concept to its utter basics, and this is what he's done with G-7. Other manu-

factured pop bands (think Spice Girls, Backstreet Boys, *ad nauseam*) still spend an inordinate amount of time on maintaining their pretense as actual musicians — releasing albums, studying choreography, lip-synching. Starlitz sees through that to the heart of the enterprise. Pop bands aren't about selling music. They're about creating an opportunity for tie-in merchandising. G-7's success rests entirely on its ability to sell action figures, T-shirts, Wonderbras, whatever. "Whoneeds big stars?" asks Starlitz. "Big stardom is poison. This is all about the marketing concept."

Starlitz is a fountain of post-modern business wisdom of this sort, and watching him swirl through his dealings and wheelings during the first few chapters makes the headspin with recognition overload. It's dead right; it's what you can feel lies behind everything you read in the newspaper and *Entertainment Weekly* or hear on television news-o-tainment programs. Starlitz schmoozing with a connected young Turkish mogul in the charred ruins of a café recently carbombed. Starlitz roping in the services of his favorite paparazzo to stoke the media for the G-7 Turkish tour. "We just want screen time and column inches for the clothes

and the shoes," he explains. Why can't his Turkish partner's girlfriend join the group? She's got too much actual talent. "The thing is, she's got to be a *genuine fake*, just like the other G-7 girls."

Starlitz sums it all up in a pep talk to another associate, this one a former Soviet fighter pilot, veteran of the Afghan war, now involved in smuggling and other "biznis" on Cyprus. "You don't want to be exciting," Starlitz tells him. "You don't want to be a man of mystery or a front-line hero. You just *make people want things*, and then you *give them what they want*. That's the secret, man. That's the secret of success."

And so in the first sixty pages of *Zeitgeist*, Starlitz establishes himself as the embodiment of the market-crazed, trend-pushing, international entertainment complex mentality that grips our world, and he tosses off enough sharp observations to populate a month's worth of Op-Ed columns. But there's something stranger going on, and that begins to emerge as Starlitz's Turkish tour unravels before it kicks off.

Starlitz rolls with the punches as he runs the G-7 act, but one rule he has set down and determines to keep: The whole thing ends in Y2K. Band dissolves, marketing deals

kaput, total shutdown. And it becomes clear that this is more than another marketing gimmick. Starlitz thinks a big change is coming for him in the year 2000 — something deep, metaphysical, something that he may not even survive. "There's a big cusp coming," he says. "A major narrative crisis. It's going to wipe a lot of slates clean."

This "narrative crisis" isn't merely conceptual. In Starlitz's world, there's a hard literal truth to some of the po-mo theoretics popular in academia. There's the consensus narrative that dominates, and within which most people lead their whole lives; and then there are other narratives, splinters and underground texts, within which other people operate some or all of the time. "There's *only* language," Starlitz explains. "There is no truth or falsehood, just dominant processes by which reality is socially constructed. In a world made out of language, nothing else is even possible."

As the early chapters make clear, Starlitz truly does embody the spirit of the later twentieth century, and that's his problem. If the twenty-first century has a different spirit — and he feels it will — then he has no place there. He literally

can't exist. Beyond 2000 there may not be any Leggy Starlitz, if the "dominant processes" that define reality no longer include someone like him in the mix.

The plot of *Zeitgeist* gets rather disjointed as it develops this concept in increasing detail. Starlitz gets sudden custody of an eleven-year-old daughter he's never met. He drops the band, drops everything, and takes her on a search for his own father. And then it's off to Hawaii for a visit with Starlitz's old friend Makoto, huge international recording star, and his partner Barbara. And then back to Turkey and Cyprus to find out why the G-7 girls are dying and to confront Starlitz's old partner Ozbey and his megalomaniacal fantasies. The episodes, while often compelling and colorful within themselves, don't exactly hang together well — the logic that moves the story from one stop to the next often just isn't there. Perhaps that's part of the late-twentieth-century zeitgeist too?

As I noted above, though, the

softness of the plot hardly matters. We read *Zeitgeist* for the warped reflection it provides of our here and now. Sterling has become our canniest cultural observer, and his eye here (as in *Distraction*) rarely falters. From cynical marketing philosophies to New Age lesbians to the relativistic theories of semiotics and deconstruction, Sterling produces a trippy satire that's as incisive as it is amusing. "If you can understand reality," Starlitz explains to his daughter, "then you can't do anything. If you're doing anything, it means that you don't understand reality." The more I ponder that one, the more clearly it seems to me the signature statement of the book, and the most concise encapsulation of the spirit of our times. In fact, it pretty closely describes the experience of Election 2000.... ₹

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APRIL FOOLS?

Some copies of our April issue were sent out without periods and miscellaneous quotation marks. The mistake was a computer error and not a deliberate prank on our printer's part, but if you got one of the hoax issues and you'd like to read the stories with all the punctuation, send us the damaged issue and we'll be happy to replace it.

A longtime resident of Connecticut, Kit Reed often writes about suburbia. She also writes frequently on the subject of parenthood (perhaps you remember the classic "Attack of the Giant Baby"?) Her latest story addresses both themes with an interesting spin...

Playmate

By Kit Reed

LOOK AT THEM, KARIN Flowers thinks, two round heads bent in the sunlight. Adorable. Danny, her testy three-year-old, is playing

nicely for once, squatting happily in the sandbox with his new best friend.

Denny, she thinks the child's name is. Sounds like Denny, but with that lisp, it's hard to tell. So what if he lisps, he's really sweet. And so easy to get along with! No matter how horrible Danny is, he can't seem to scare this one off the way he does every other sorry excuse for a playmate.

Denny, is it? Could his name be Danny too? Not likely, it's just too coincidental. It's enough that they look alike. The difference is that Karin's Danny is, okay, difficult, while Denny/whoever, the neighbors' child, is perfect. If he comes over often enough, maybe some of it will rub off on Danny here. She thinks Denny's mom could probably teach her a thing or two about parenting, but hey. She's a working mom. It's enough to throw the ball or make brownies with the boys, life is too short to go knocking on other mothers' doors. Besides. The last thing a careerist like

Karin needs is advice from some candy-faced professional mom. *Perhaps if you were around long enough to exercise a little discipline....*

So what if the woman does do it better? Denny always knocks politely and comes in smiling, amazing manners for somebody a narrow notch above toddler. It's as if he tries to stay small, so she won't trip over him and send him home. Doesn't fight, always shares. Never cries even when Danny bops him. Trots off to the toilet without being reminded and if there's a problem over a toy, Denny laughs and hands it over.

Karin never has to worry about what they are doing when he gives her that ravishing smile and the two of them trot off into Danny's room. At the end of the day every single toy will be shut back in the toy chest and all Danny's stuffed animals will be back on the shelves, staring at her with military precision.

Unlike her own personal dirt tornado, Denny always has a clean face, shining hair, cute OshKosh overalls and coordinated T-shirts, no food stains that Karin can see. Ever. It's clear the child's mother takes good care of him. *Right*, she thinks with a twinge of guilt. *Like he's a full-time job.*

And if she's never met her? Hey. People keep to themselves here in Cadogan Hills. Nice neighborhood, there are some lovely people here. But. Sometimes Karin thinks it would take a quake or an explosion to make them open the regulation white drapes in their uniform picture windows and a firebomb to bring them out of their front doors. Cadogan Hills is so exclusive that except for a couple she met at preschool and cute Denny here, she hasn't seen any of her neighbors up close. Oh, chronic gardeners wave as you drive by in the nightly attempt to find your own house, but you'd better not stop to talk. After all, you haven't been introduced. And she hears children playing at twilight sometimes but she never sees them.

A gated community was never Karin's idea of a good time — upmarket, manicured "homes" and yuppie neighbors cut from the same social cloth — but she understood what big Dan was buying when he moved them in. "Life's too short to deal with downscale neighbors," he told her. "We both work too hard to waste time hunting suitable friends for our kid."

So what if it's lonely? Dan is right. With everything going on at the ad agency, Karin's hard pressed to get in all her mothering before work and early evenings, when she drags herself home so tired that she's walking on

her knuckles. She's spread too thin to check out every little friend Danny tries to make. During the week, Blanca copes. Even though Blanca is from Ecuador and not too good at English, she's terrific. Danny adores her, which is both necessary and a source of jealousy. She cooks, cleans, manages play dates, she carpools to the community preschool where Danny is supposed to get socialized. Which is what the Flowerses are paying the five K for, according to the brochure. But Blanca also gets the best of his smiles and those cute new words. It's the only reason she hasn't quit.

Listen, Karin tells herself. That's weekdays. The weekends are mine.

Denny comes over Saturdays and every Sunday. If he's there weekdays, Blanca doesn't say. He picks the best time — after Karin's had her kid fix and before Danny starts whining, "I'm bored." Danny lights up. "Doorbell!"

"I bet I know who it is." Smiling, Karin opens the door and looks out at eye level. At his giggle, she looks down and pretends to be surprised. "Why, it's Denny!" She does not say, *again*.

Green OshKosh overalls today. Canary yellow shirt. Blond hair, bowl haircut just like Danny's. Karin thinks that's why she likes the child so much. They look like brothers. Who wouldn't like a neighbor child, looks a lot like one of her own? She thinks sentimentally, *the second child I ever had*. "Can Danny play?"

"Benny?" she tries. He blinks those green eyes. "Or is it Lenny?" He murmurs in that little kid way. With a *frisson* she leans closer. Why does this part creep her out? She tries, "Danny?"

He blinks. Doesn't exactly evade; he says "Denny," or something like it — she thinks. Then, clearly, "Is Danny here?"

"Of course, sweetie, come on in." When Karin bends to hug him, he clings so she has to pry his fingers off. *Poor kid*, she notes. *Full-time mother and starved for love*. With a darling smile, he trots off to Danny's room.

The child's mother would speak clearly — real name, nickname, might even reel off a pedigree and a list of food fetishes, but Karin has decided not to like her. If she was that good a mom, Denny wouldn't be over here all the time. The woman seems to drop him on the doorstep, ring the bell and go. Unless, since Cadogan Hills is so quiet and ultrasafe, he

trots over on his own. Unlike hellacious Terry McGonnigle, whose parents are brokers, Denny is an ideal guest. With Terry, Karin has to be on the phone with Patti McGonnigle every living minute — hitting, fights, better come over, Terry started it, but he's going to need stitches.

She never, ever has to discipline Denny. It's a little eerie, but he's never bad! And bless him, he never overstays. Comes after lunch so she won't need to feed him or phone his mom about allergies, and just when she starts wondering whether to call and ask if he can stay for supper, he lisps "Fsthangs" and goes.

"It's pizza," Karin offers at suppertime, even though she's glad it will be just the three of them — her, Danny and Dan.

"I mvf piffm," Denny says.

"We'd love to have you, Denny."

He says — it sounds like, "Mwenny."

"Lenny?"

"Fwenny."

"Oh, Kenny."

Little mite standing there with fur in his mouth and sweet, blind love shining in his eyes. "Nwmenny."

"Do you know your phone number?"

He shakes his head.

"I can walk over with you, ask her myself."

"Nemf." Smiling, he shakes his head.

Safe as a theme park, Cadogan Hills is completely silent at twilight, happy families sitting down together behind locked doors. The late afternoon light is thinning and Karin says in a moment of apprehension, "Will you be okay going home, or shall I get Mr. Flowers to walk you?" She imagines marauders in the bushes, coyotes swarming down out of the hills. "Just a minute." Calls. "Dan?"

"Nmmne," Denny says. A little agitated. Lenny? Kenny?

And when she comes back with Dan, the child is gone. "He's so little," she says to her husband. "I hope he gets home all right."

"Perfectly safe." Dan slides his arm around her waist. "That's what we're paying for. For all we know, he lives next door."

"Danny, stop that!" The kid is elbowing and gouging between them.

He hates it when they touch. Karin worries. "I should tell his mother he's on the way."

Dan draws her back into their warm kitchen. "Believe me, if he doesn't make it, you'll hear soon enough. Danny, stop that!"

"I don't know," Karin says uneasily, "these houses are tight as drums. Anything could happen out there and we'd never know."

"If anything bad could get past the gate," Dan says. "Which it can't. Security."

She sighs. "Security." And notes peripherally that Danny is wearing Denny's shoes. "Danny, where are your shoes?"

"Mwenny," he says.

"Top of the line Ralph Lauren 4Kidz and you swapped them for K-mart sneakers! Danny, what were you thinking?"

"Nmmne." Past the point of no return on this Saturday, her son wrenches the joystick off his Nintendo and starts jabbing her.

"Stop that. And speak clearly!"

A round-the-clock mom would probably max out on a chronic guest whose mother never invites back. A professional mother would resent this, *Is this unfair or what?* Thing is, Danny is such a handful that half the time Karin wants to beg Blanca to stay all weekend, but no. Wouldn't be motherly. Besides, two days, she ought to be able to handle it and Denny makes it tons easier. Always handy, and he never makes her say, "Don't you have a home?" or, "Won't your mommy worry about you?"

Still, they may be playing together too much. The shoes. And Danny has picked up the lisp. She comes home one day to find him in an outfit she never bought. Green OshKosh overalls, canary yellow shirt. Cute. Fresh, as they say, as paint, but not what she put on him this morning before she left for work.

"Danny, where did you get these?"

"Mwenny."

"Stop it with the lisping. You can talk, so drop it. Where did you say they came from?"

But Danny smiles an angelic Denny smile and says through fur, "Fwerhnm."

"Don't make me get a speech therapist for you." She sighs. "And look

what you did to his clothes! Better let me put these in the machine. If we send them back dirty, Denny's mom is going to think we're terrible."

Doesn't think much of it until she comes home from work Monday and finds him wearing Denny's clothes again. Green OshKosh overalls, canary yellow shirt. Wrecked, of course. When she peels them off, Danny begins to cry.

"Sweetie, what's the matter?"

"I want them. He promised." Danny's bawling so hard that it's all he can manage. Never an easy child, he grapples her to the mat over the outfit: "We're swapping, Mom, we're SWAPPING."

"All right. Shit. Fine. But let's do this right." Grimly, she phones Macy's and orders a dozen canary T-shirts and a dozen pairs of OshKosh overalls. FedExed, priority. No explaining to Denny's mom. When Danny wrecks one set, Karin will damn well replace them.

A failure, that effort. Even before the clothes come and Danny rips, spots and/or stains every item, Denny's mother has changed him into engineer striped OshKoshes with little white polo shirts. No matter what Karin puts on Danny in the morning, when she comes home at night he is wearing Denny's outfit.

It's not as upsetting as the hair. Bowl haircuts one day, buzz cuts the next. Denny is first. He arrives on a Sunday morning with that sweet grin and fresh OshKoshes — blue! her heart sinks — and a buzz cut. "My," she says, making a mental note to take Danny to the barber — the kid screams like a demon every time she tries to comb his hair so this is a Good Thing — "don't you look nice."

Smiling, he trots past her into Danny's room. Wow! This is so weird! When they come out at the end of the day Danny's hair is buzz cut too. Karin sweeps through Danny's room like a tornado. There's no telling how the children brought this off. No sign of clippers, not a loose blond hair anywhere.

Weird, she thinks, and is secretly glad that she doesn't have to drag screaming Danny to the barber. Frankly, she doesn't like the way the barber looks at them on these visits, as if she's a Nazi hunter with a fresh catch. So what if he's been bitten twice, it's not like Danny is Hannibal Lecter.

So the weekends go on nicely enough in Cadogan Hills, although

Karin is distinctly disturbed on the day when she goes into Danny's room and finds both children naked. Nothing dirty, she's sure of it. They're too young and besides, she can tell by their expressions; but undressed like that, they really are hard to tell apart and it's this that she finds unnerving. The children dress quickly enough and Denny peels off, trotting smartly for the front door with a lisped "fwnm," which she takes to mean "Thank you."

Cadogan Hills, Cadogan Hills, for months this child has been coming to her house and Karin still doesn't know which of the identical high end houses in their cul-de-sac he's actually coming from. A wild thought crosses her mind. What if Denny gets dropped at the main gate by some latterday Fagan intent on casing the house, or by hippies in a neoSeventies psychedelic bus? He's small enough to snake through the bars or wriggle underneath while the guard isn't looking and come up in the ornamental shrubbery outside the clubhouse. What was that guy's name, still in jail, has his own album, Charles Manson? Karin's sure it's nothing like that but Denny's mother should have the kids at her house for a change, and besides. Best, she thinks, to follow the child to his house and confront her.

She waits until the next Saturday play date. After Denny thanks her and goes, Karin slips out the front door into the sweet, safe twilight of Cadogan Hills and follows. In the half-darkness she can't know whether Denny spotted her or is skibbling along unawares. If he saw her, is he leading her away from his house or toward it? In the deepening shadows he ducks under wrought iron gates and bounds over flower borders as if he doesn't have a care. Then he shoots a wild, sly grin over his round little shoulder and disappears into a crowd of moving shadows.

Odd, being out here in the dark. Disorienting. For a minute she imagines the bushes are full of shifty little children but when she crunches through a neighbor's hedge to get closer they evaporate and she backs out quickly before the alarm goes off and the First Alert cars come down on her.

"I don't know what to think," she tells Dan that night, whispering so Danny won't hear. At the moment he is having a tantrum in his crib, which they still use because at least they know he's safe when the bars are up. It isn't so bad his walking *in*, the problem is when he picks up the nearest sharp instrument and starts hitting. Karin's mother insists that

Danny needs a touch of the hair brush, but Karin doesn't believe in spanking and besides, her take on discipline is another story. *He doesn't see that much of me, I don't want him to have only bad memories.* So what if she's paying for it now? It's not as if she can do it differently, or upgrade to a better model.

"If he had something to hide," Dan says into her hair, "Benny wouldn't keep coming over."

"Denny. I think."

"Besides, he's only a kid!"

"A sweet one," she says mournfully. "I know you love Cadogan Hills, but if you want to know the truth, it's a little weird out there. For a minute tonight I thought...." But she is interrupted by Danny roaring for attention. He hasn't barged in on them yet but she just found a dead mouse under her pillow. Token of love, she wonders? As if from a cat? *It's for you, Mom.* Why does this make her shudder? "All right," she calls in her best false voice, "All right, I'm coming!"

Odd to be scared of your own child, especially in this bastion of safety, but Karin used to pray for Denny to come every Saturday because it was easier, and when he did, she prayed for Sundays. Now she wishes he'd stay forever. *Lord, she thinks, what if I scared him off? What will I do with Danny then?*

But Sunday morning he's there, okay. He and Danny play so nicely that after a while the silence gets to her and she sticks her head in the door. Odd, what she thinks she sees. Two round heads turn toward her, two pudgy right hands hold strange little rubber masks with kids' features and...No, she thinks, shutting the door quickly, she did not see two little boys with flesh-colored blanks where they used to have faces.

When they come out of Danny's room, everything is as before. Everything is fine. Fine! Karin has no trouble telling them apart because Danny gouges her in the shins "accidentally" as he comes out and as he leaves, Denny gives her one of those sweet smiles of his. She is thinking about those flickering shadows. "Denny, it's really dark. Don't you want me to walk you?"

"Nwm," he says, shaking his head gravely.

As the door closes, Danny astounds her. "I am sick of Denny."

"Oh no," she says. "It's Sunday night after all, you guys had a great

time today and you're just tired. You know you love Denny. Now let's go have supper."

The next day is Monday and a work day. Karin goes off without kissing Danny good-bye. He was, as Dan says at times like these, pissy to her. She gets home so late that Blanca collides with her in her hurry to get out. "Blanca!" *Oh dear. Better ask. "How was he?"*

"You know, Ms. Flowers." Blanca sighs with her eyes rolled up for emphasis. "Thank God the friend came."

"Denny?"

"Lenny, maybe. Benny.... Strange today, Ma'am, so strange!"

Karin groans. "Okay, Blanca, let's hear it."

"He not want to go home! First time ever. I push him out. Have to push hard. Feel bad about it," Blanca says.

"Oh well," Karin says. "No harm done, even perfect children have a bad day sooner or later. He'll be bright and sunny by the time he comes back."

"He won't be back," Blanca murmurs right before she slams the door and the alarm system kicks in.

Odd, Karin thinks. This is a little odd.

Then Danny comes out of his room and for the first time ever, he looks absolutely, completely and totally glad to see her. "Hi Mom, I missed you, Mom."

With a minimal flicker of guilt Karin says carefully, "Denny?"

And is oddly satisfied when the child says clear as a bell and right as rain and right on the button just exactly what she hoped he'd say, "Mommy, don't you know me?" Smiling, seraphic. "It's me, Mom. Danny."

For a second. Just a split second, she considers. Then she wraps her arms around her child and picks him up. "I know you are," she says, hugging him close. Closer. Forever. "I know my own sweet Danny when I see him."



Around these parts, Richard Bowes is known best for his memorable Kevin Grierson stories, such as "On Death and the Deuce" and "So Many Miles to the Heart of a Child." Recently he has begun a new series of stories concerning the Time Rangers, those mysterious people who patrol the streams of time. One such tale appeared in the online magazine SciFiction. Here we bring you another, a poignant look at life in the 1950s as it never was.

The Ferryman's Wife

By Richard Bowes

1.



T 7:40 ON THE FIRST WARM day of April, on a Tuesday, that least remarkable of days, the platform at Grove Hill train station was all but deserted.

Cars soon arrived, a Country Squire first, a DeSoto V8 next, then a flood of fins and chrome. Commuters disembarked.

As 7:49 approached, Oldsmobiles jockeyed with Pontiacs; sunlight gleamed on waxed finishes. A few women got out of autos and waited on the platform. But mostly it was husbands who gave good-bye kisses to wives with hair still in curlers and babies with zwieback-stuffed mouths.

For in that year, 1956, the great nation of the West was reinventing itself, changing from a land, part urban and part rural, into something not seen in the world before.

Linda Martin sat behind the wheel of the blue and white Chevy Bel Air and savored her favorite moment of the day. She rolled down her

window as Roy slid out of the passenger seat beside her, passed before the car making goo-goo eyes at six-year-old Sally in the back seat.

He doffed his narrow brimmed hat, ducked his head to the open window. His mouth tasted of Pepsodent, coffee, eggs and bacon and a single on-the-way-to-the-train Chesterfield. "Keep Lady Olivia amused," he murmured.

"She'd be happier if you did that," Linda whispered in his ear.

"Nah, no aristocrats for me. I'm a damn commissar. Comes the revolution, they all get shot."

Linda giggled but glanced in the rearview mirror. She could just hear their daughter's voice, loud and clear, asking in public, "Mommy, why is Daddy a commissar?" But Sally was watching intently for the appearance of the commuter train.

With the ghost of a wink, Roy stuck his hat on at the perfect angle and joined the marching husbands. Linda admired his easy way among the topcoated men. They were joined by old Mrs. Egan who liked to visit her specialists in the city and by Minnie Delahunt who, for reasons much speculated about, had kept her job in the fashion business even after getting married.

The train was out of sight as Linda turned on the radio for news. Driving out of the parking lot, she still felt Roy's parting touch and holding that memory, was with him as he walked through a rocking car, greeting a man in horn rims whom they both knew through the PTA.

Roy found a seat, opened his briefcase. Unlike the rest of the passengers Roy could see in the dark and differentiate one set of footsteps from the dozens behind him on a crowded city street. And unlike almost anyone else in that time and place, he was aware of his wife's contact. And he could deflect it, which he did with a little smile.

Linda smiled too as she steered into traffic. An announcer on the car radio said, "A perfect blend." Maybe he was pitching coffee or a new miracle fabric. But to Linda it described the life Roy and she had made in this time and place.

Because a road crew was repairing the usual route, she detoured down Main Street.

"Mommy?" asked a voice with a keen edge. In the air was that precarious moment when a thought becomes an idea.

And Linda, her attention focused on the back seat, saw in the mirror the slight quiver of a six-year-old's pigtails, the growing light in the eyes which were Roy's eyes. "Yes, hon?"

"How long is Auntie Olives going to stay?" The idea took form.

"A little while. Why?"

"Because last week Timothy brought his rabbit to school and nobody else has one and everyone got to touch her."

"And you wondered?" Linda felt the idea become a plan.

"No one else has an aunt from England. And she could sing." The plan was broached.

Much of Linda's concentration was focused on Sally. Most of the rest was devoted to negotiating traffic on the two blocks of shops that constituted downtown Grove Hill. So she only glanced at a delivery truck making a left turn beside Stillwell's Grocery.

Just a black, closed truck driving down a shadowed alley, but it caught her attention. The driver's face, seen for a moment in profile, was so ordinary as to escape the memory. The phrase "hard to pick out of a police lineup" occurred to her. Driver and vehicle evoked dark deeds when the whole point of a village like Grove Hill was never to suggest anything even remotely like that.

The voice from the back seat said, "Can she, Mommy? Huh?"

And Linda heard herself say, "You have to ask Auntie Olives, honey." She realized that she too was calling their guest that.

Driver and vehicle were out of sight and contact. Alone, she would have cut back immediately. As it was, she drove to the Pathfinder Elementary School. Half distracted, she agreed that Sally could ask their house guest to be that week's Show and Tell.

When Linda returned to Main Street ten minutes later, there was no sign of the delivery truck behind Stillwell's nor anywhere else. In the gray stone and white clapboard stores of Grove Hill's Main Street, she made quick purchases of a quart of milk, lightbulbs, a pack of cigarettes. In each place she made casual mention of a truck that she said had cut her off. Her discreet probe produced the information that there had been no deliveries that morning.

Roy, long gone down the tracks to New York City, would not be accessible until evening. She reached for Sally. *Right hand on left side.*

Not like Perry Gibson next to her who had it wrong. Saying the magic words, "...one nation invisible...."

Linda considered the slippery path from proper precaution through solipsism to paranoia as she got back in the Chevy. Still, instead of heading directly home, she drove onto the parkway and off again. East Radley was the town next to Grove Hill. It lacked a commuter station and was considered a bit dusty and decayed.

A place on the corner where she turned was owned by an old Italian couple who had a small vineyard out back, a statue of the Virgin Mary in the front yard. The neighborhood was mostly large, older houses. As she had been taught since she was eleven, Linda did not reach out.

Abruptly, she felt the touch. Like a sudden ripple on the water, swirling leaves, a shooting star seen at the corner of an eye. Dearest? Mrs. Wood was home.

She tried to keep her memories of the truck, the driver, the people she questioned, as clear as they had been when she first saw them. Mrs. Wood accepted her offering.

Linda Martin pulled up in front of a tall shingled Queen Anne house. It had an old-fashioned conservatory attached. No car sat in the driveway and the blinds were drawn. A slide and some see-saws could be seen out back. The voices of children were heard. But the back yard was big and overgrown and the voices sounded far away.

Aware of neighbors and casual curiosity, Linda scribbled a note, an actual one about needing a sitter for that Thursday. She walked up to the front porch as if that was why she had come.

Bending to slip the paper under the door, she caught the images of the truck, the driver, the store-keepers on Main Street. All had been rearranged and examined. Clumsiness too is a strategy. Just that and no more. She had turned to go when Mrs. Wood touched her again. Your guest. Linda caught the image of a woman, wild-haired, naked. It took Linda a moment to realize what the woman was doing. Her passage is in your hands.

Linda remained bending. "Sally is safe?"

She saw another face then, black and white. Beautiful. Mrs. Wood smiled as if that hardly needed asking.

It was well after nine by the time Linda parked the car in her driveway. That was when she heard the voice. A soprano clean as a child's trilled up the years from a place where being a ruined woman was an identity and a full-time occupation.

*I leaned my back up against some oak,
Thinking that he was a trusty tree.
But first he bended, then he broke,
And so did my false love to me.*

Think of the song as compensation, Linda told herself as she opened the door and saw a petticoat, *her petticoat from Bendel's!* draped over the hall table. Slips had been taken out of drawers and dropped on the floor without even being tried on. Linda followed the trail of undergarments down to the rec room. This world did not hold enough chemise and lingerie to satisfy the guest. Linda had come to regard it as like being around a magic animal, one which sang wondrously but shed everywhere.

Olivia Wexford sat in a green silk floor-length robe, her skin like fine porcelain. She brushed her auburn hair with long strokes. It was something she had, with great reluctance, just learned to do for herself. Still, the repeated gesture was elegant each time. She looked up as Linda entered, with an unguarded expression of cold speculation.

She wonders, Linda thought to herself, where I've been for the last hour when I should have been here entertaining her. In her slacks, blouse and French-bobbed brunet haircut, Linda was cute and knew it. But here she felt dowdy, almost sexless. The TV was on with the sound off. Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Greenjeans skipped around a table. Mr. Greenjeans, a proper second banana, was poker-faced but the Captain mugged each time he passed the camera.

The guest gave a surpassingly raucous laugh. "Amusing rustics," she said. Her eyes sparkled, her face was animated. If one could ignore the background of pine paneling, the local florist's calendar on the wall, she could have stepped out of a painting by Gainsborough or Romney, *Lady Olivia Wexford at Her Toilette*.

Hated and feared back home, unable to boil water, resentful of having

to dress herself, disturbed and aroused that men could see her bare ankles, wherever Olivia was it would always be 1759.

Idly, out of habit, Linda brushed her guest's mind. And was stopped abruptly by an image of a silk fan in pink and pearl. On the fan, half-dressed and agape, Bacchus and Ariadne encountered each other for the first time. With a slight nod, Linda backed off. Lady Wexford had a powerful protector.

Aware of what had just happened, suddenly reflective, Olivia sipped chocolate out of a doll-size china cup. "HE knew my life up and down, how I had lived it and what I'd do next," she said. "HE promised me all of Time but little did I guess that I would see it as a fugitive in flight."

She had fallen hard not for an ordinary lord, goodness help them all, some ass in a powdered wig and silk stockings. No, her particular daemon lover was a power of a kind that made Linda wary. It was not well to know more than a god wanted you to.

"In the last place where the Rangers had me, shock was a favorite word," said Olivia. "It referred to glassy-eyed ex-soldiers, hysterical young women with skirts above their knees. And to me."

Fresh from the ruins of her own world, Lady Olivia had stayed in a private nursing home just outside London in a certain 1920. This particular sanitarium was secretly controlled by the organization known, where they were known, as the Time Rangers.

"Scarcely could I concentrate my mind enough to wonder why I was there, much less what was to be done to me. Here, I have begun to unravel various mysteries."

Linda saw the image of the fan snap shut, replaced by what looked like a Watteau painting. Light shone through trees, moss grew like velvet, a white body reclined, privacy protected by long auburn hair and chains. They were graceful chains but secure all the same. Lady Olivia Wexford was staked out in the woods. "Bait," she said, "is what I will be, a playing piece in the games of the Rangers and the Gods."

Linda thought to herself, "After what you and your lover boy did, you're lucky not to have been burned at the stake." Aloud she said, "Let's finish getting you dressed. Makeup first."

Olivia's nose wrinkled. "In that last London where I stayed, girls who had not been kissed, much less deflowered, wore whores' paint."

"Nonetheless. We must honor local custom."

"Let us," Olivia said as she rose, and Linda noted how she barely overcame the instinct to issue orders, "Let us go into the city."

"Not today. I didn't arrange for a babysitter." Linda thought of the black truck. Instinctively, she reached out. Through Sally's eyes, a mile away, she saw a blackboard and on it the letter H written as big as a six-year-old.

"We're going to the supermarket," she said. Lids rolled over the guest's wide blue eyes. Life with Sally had prepared Linda for these moments, so she added, "And on the way, we can have a driving lesson."

Lady Wexford's eyes opened at this and she allowed herself to be guided upstairs. A bit longer afterward than Linda would have thought possible, Olivia had helped to dress herself in a velvet jacket and a pair of Linda's toreator pants under a flared skirt. She had put on flat pumps and was standing at the front door.

"Lord Riot was what HE was called and after a summer of HIS rule the city lay in smoldering ruins. All burned, the palaces and churches, the docks and the slums. And the populace, gentry and commoners were gone to whatever place HE had led them. But in that other London where I just stayed, it was 1920 and while all else was changed, the palaces and churches still stood and nobody had ever heard of the summer of Lord Riot."

"Damn right," Linda thought. "The Rangers spent a lot of effort making sure your particular London never got heard of again."

She opened the front door and Olivia stepped out. Linda noticed the other woman's slight shudder as she entered an alien world.

In the driveway, Lady Wexford touched the hood and roof of the Chevy as if she were acquainting herself with a new horse. While they drove, she listened intently to Linda's explanation of the ignition, the steering wheel, the clutch, the gas pedal.

At the supermarket she was at once coy and haughty, dizzy in what seemed to her to be public nudity. Linda was aware of the assistant manager at the meat counter, an Italian kid, appraising them. Olivia noticed also. Linda couldn't see the glance that was thrown, but the young man took a step back, face flushed, eyes wide open.

"Amusing rustics," Linda thought. "That's what we are for her."

"Duz, Palmolive, Ivory," Olivia said. "A cornucopia, a soap for every purpose. But every place looks like every other. Your house is the mirror duplicate of one at the corner of your street. The house across the road from yours looks exactly like one three doors down. You tell me this isn't the same store we were in on Friday last?"

"Not even the same town. That was an A&P in Larchmont, remember? This is a Safeway. In the Leather Stocking Shopping Center in Grove Hill." Then she repeated something she had said before to other refugees fleeing Upstream or Down. "These suburbs sprang out of nowhere. No one knows anyone else." She added, "Here you are my English cousin, Olivia Smithfield. A bit odd, a bit exotic. But a recognizable commodity. Here everyone is a bit of an Anglophile. This is where you learn to blend."

Lady Olivia's eyes narrowed. Blending in was not why she had been born and raised. In the checkout line, she fumbled with a wallet and bills. The lesson for today was paying for purchases. In her prior life she had never touched so much as a penny. "Foolish colonial monies!" she said but smiled as she did, amusing the cashier and winning an approving nod from Linda.

It was well after noon by the time they had wheeled the cart out to the Chevy, loaded the groceries into the trunk, and sat in a booth at the back of a mostly empty luncheonette.

"You said that you were raised in this time." Lady Wexford's expression indicated that she found the idea fascinating and appalling.

The oldest student trick, Linda knew. Get the teachers to talk about their VERY favorite subject. Themselves. Still, her cover story came in layers, so she peeled one off and said, "I'm a Ranger's wife. We go where he's assigned. I'm happy that we're where I can help him."

"Yet you are not a Ranger."

"No. My mother was. A station chief like Roy. 1950's North America was her assignment. More or less the same one he has. Keeping the peace, managing the Time Stream. Jake Stockley was her husband. He was a Ranger field operative, kind of low level. Not a bad guy at all. Lovable. But he wasn't my father. My dad was dead before I could remember him. My mother had remarried."

Olivia listened intently. Linda found herself surprised by how much she wanted to talk.

"The first time we hit 1960, I wasn't even two and didn't know the difference between that and 1950. All I understood was we were in a new house. Outside Chicago. Mom and Jake were real estate agents. A nice cover. It fooled me.

"By my second 1959, I was eleven. I thought Tony Curtis was dreamy and had a major crush on Danny Larogga in my sixth grade class because I thought he looked like Tony Curtis. I was lobbying for a poodle skirt and training bra in exchange for having to wear braces on my teeth. Couldn't have been more typical if I'd been trying.

"Mom had been dropping hints for a long while. And the evidence was all around me, the number of strange 'friends' who stayed with us, the way Jake traveled on business all the time, the fact that Mom read the papers, watched the news constantly but was never surprised by anything. So I knew, but I didn't want to find out." Linda looked inquiringly at Lady Olivia who nodded her understanding.

"At that point, Mom took me aside and explained that she and Ranger Stockley and I were going to move. Bad enough. But, instead of it being to an identical ranch house in another town, we were going where I could get to see them build the ranch houses. Where Tony Curtis was still waiting tables and Danny Larogga was being toilet trained.

"The name of our new home was 1950. The Korean War. Harry Truman. Ancient history. We, it turned out, had reached the end of Mom's Beat. As Jake put it later, "Weird, huh kid, whores and cops have beats."

Linda caught Olivia's look, distant, speculative. She had said too much. "Want to get behind the wheel?" she asked.

As they got in the car, she reached out and was aware of blue. *Bouncing in the air. The whole class had been given balloons. Sally's was blue. The bus was here and she was taking her blue balloon home.*

A few minutes later, Linda and Olivia were in the Chevy. Lady Wexford marveled as she headed for the parking lot exit. "As if I had in hand a team of a thousand horses!" In her enthusiasm, she stepped down on the brake. The car bucked and stalled.

A trailer truck with Wonder Bread logos was pulling into the lot. Gears ground, what sounded like a steam whistle blared. From his high seat, the trucker yelled, "Drive it or park it, lady!"

As he did, Linda saw a black delivery van, the same or the twin of the

one that morning, speed by on the access road. Instantly, she took a deep breath and said. "Get out of the seat!" The van had already disappeared. It was between her and Pathfinder Elementary School.

Lady Olivia obeyed instantly. Ignoring the horn and the yelling, they changed places. Linda had orders to protect her guest. But she had a higher priority. She drove in the same direction as the truck. Olivia sat silent beside her. As they approached the school, Linda began to circle. She reached out:

Blue bounced beside her. Holding onto blue. Red across the aisle jumped back and forth. Green spun out of control. BANG! Green disappeared. Perry Gibson cried. Other kids laughed.

On a quiet street, Linda caught sight of the yellow bus making its slow, easy way toward a cluster of women and carriages and pre-schoolers. She looked around, saw nothing, and so made no move for the .32 caliber automatic concealed under the driver's seat.

"It's Sally, isn't it?" Linda had forgotten about Olivia. "You have sensed a threat." Linda nodded, circled the block. Found nothing. Pulled into a wider arc around the bus. "I would aid you however I can."

The air was full of balloons and she was holding onto the blue balloon. All around were yellow balloons and red. But only one blue balloon. Perry, sticky with tears, grabbed for it and her elbow went out and stopped him.

Linda approached her house cautiously. She drove up the next street, looked at the back of her place and saw nothing. She pulled into her driveway as the yellow bus turned the corner. While it pulled to the curb, she checked the house and garage doors. No sign of forced entry.

"How long have you had the ability you just showed?" Olivia asked.

Linda knew this woman had studied her all the while her attention had been focused on her daughter. She cut the truth to fit the moment. "Before Sally? Randomly. And only with those I could actually see. With her? As you observed."

She and Olivia walked out to the sidewalk. The balloon came toward them. "Mommy, I told them that Auntie Olives was from England and she'd sing." Linda saw Olivia blink and realized that she too had caught Sally's memory of standing before her class announcing what she was bringing to Show and Tell.

"Honey." Linda pretended this hadn't happened. "I said you had to ask her first. What if she doesn't want to?"

Linda turned and found the Lady looking at Sally with a mixture of tenderness and regret. Olivia had a daughter. A child born and taken from her. Two hundred years ago. A few months before.

"I will, my dear Sally," said Olivia. "I'll sing and I'll tell a story." A thought seemed to amuse her. "I'll tell you all about the Ferryman and the Wolf."

ROY, LINDA, and Olivia had been invited to a dinner party that evening at the Stanleys'. George and Alice Stanley were celebrating their wedding anniversary. They lived two doors down on the block behind Roy and Linda Martin. Cindy, a rare teenager in this neighborhood of young couples and small children, had agreed to babysit with Sally.

When Roy got home, Linda told him about the truck. They agreed not to change their plans. But, as if on a whim, Roy went out the back door carrying a bottle of champagne. No fence or hedge separated their yard from the Hackers who lived directly behind them. He let the women go first, hung back. Scouting the ground, Linda knew, on the off-chance he had to come back from the party in a big hurry.

In her black party sheath, she watched Olivia sweep before her in a full skirt. Frank and Marge Hacker, on their way to the party, paused and awaited them. "How do you like America?" Frank asked Olivia.

"Your driving is exhilarating!"

"Different side of the road than in England."

"Your provincial rules are an endless plague!"

Frank was dazzled; Marge was plainly annoyed. Linda caught a glimpse through their eyes of Olivia and herself. And of Roy behind them. He scuffed at something with his shoe.

Alice and George Stanley had gotten married shortly before he was sent over to England with the Army Air Corps. Wartime now seemed to them distant and romantic.

At dinner, Linda's attention rode on a dream taking place in Sally's bedroom a few hundred feet away. It involved a class of bad dogs who would not listen to their teacher.

Then she heard George Stanley ask Olivia, "Were you in London during the Blitz?"

Lady Wexford paused. Conversation stopped. Olivia said, with just a slight tremor. "Awful. Terrible. The city destroyed. Nothing but rubble." Everyone made consoling noises.

After dinner, Marge Hacker remarked to Linda Martin, "You seem so far away." She followed Linda's gaze and saw Roy amid a group of men who were discussing the old Joe DiMaggio and the new Willie Mays. Roy was silent. He looked at Olivia, who was looking back. Several of the women, in phone conversations the next day, pinned Linda's distance to the fine rapport that had sprung up between her English relative and her handsome husband.

"But you picked up nothing from the driver," Roy said that night when he and Linda were in bed. Slightly drunk and needing sleep, he was reviewing her account of the delivery truck driver. "Clumsy," he said. "Our Upstream friends use their human agents a lot more adroitly."

"Unless they want them to be seen." Linda lowered her voice, though Olivia was asleep down the hall. "Any word on how much longer our guest will be with us?"

"Another week, possibly two. Then she gets moved up closer to the Front. I don't know what the game is." He sounded wistful. In the Time Wars, 1956 was a rear area, far away from the action. "I thought you found her interesting."

"Mrs. Wood showed me something today." Linda felt him tense at the mention of Mrs. Wood. But she said, "Olivia was a wild-haired, pregnant Bacchae. She sat on a pile of rubble, naked except for a silk wristlet. She carried a head. Its mouth was open. Like it was still indignant at having been separated from its body."

"We in the Main Stream know the head's former owner as King George III," Linda said. "In that particular 1759, Lady Olivia Wexford helped tear it off his shoulders, impetuous minx that she is."

"I say, no Boston tea party for Georgie that time around," Roy murmured in a silly-ass voice and sank under deep waters. Even in sleep, Linda was deflected from his thoughts. What she felt when trying to touch them reminded her of the static between stations on the radio dial.

She remained awake in the midst of the quiet streets, the slumbering

neighborhood. Then she saw a face, round and flushed, youthful but with deep, ancient eyes under white powdered hair. Olivia dreamed of her former lover. Linda automatically looked away.

Lord Riot was what the London mobs called him. He had an abundance of names along the Time Stream. Linda thought of him as Dionysius. But Riot was as good as anything else.

Lord Riot had swept up a large part of the population of Olivia's England, joined it to hordes from a dozen similar places, hurled the frenzied mass Upstream and pushed the frontier back a few years. The Gods were going down hard.

They have ruled the backs of our minds, the willing places in our hearts for a thousand generations. But their reign will last only as long as human thought and emotion. A couple of centuries Upstream is a Frontier. On the other side, beings move and communicate. But we would call them machines and they will call us meat.

Jake Stockley, Linda's stepfather, had tried to explain to her the alliances of the Rangers and the Gods. She was twelve and first asking questions. "Politics makes strange bedfellows, kid," he said. "Somewhere up the chain of command this game makes sense." But even he didn't seem convinced.

In that game, Olivia was a prize. It seemed to Linda that using Riot was like trying to harness a cyclone or ride a tidal wave, that Lady Wexford was dangerous to be near. On the night air, she heard a cry, saw an image sharp as a blade: an infant, swaddled, wrapped in rabbit fur, seen one last time. Lady Olivia dreamed of her baby being taken away from her. Ancient eyes stared out at Linda. Lord Riot claimed his child.

2.

Nice towns like Grove Hill exist outside every city in the nation. Pass through there on the train today and you'll find that the stores on Main Street have become antique shops and boutiques. The trees that survive are bigger. The parking lot is larger. ATV's have replaced the station wagons and many women await the 7:49.

But much looks the same as on a Thursday morning almost fifty years ago when Linda drove the Chevy to the station. Olivia and Sally rode in the back seat. Today was Show and Tell.

Roy sat beside her smoking his fifth cigarette of the morning. The day before, he and Linda had argued at any moment when they were alone. In the morning it had been about how Sally was being brought up. "I don't want you leaving her with the Goddamn witch." When he was that angry, tiny cracks appeared in his twentieth-century American accent. "Mrs. Wood!" He managed to say the name as if it was a euphemism for shit.

Wednesday evening, the argument had been about Ranger procedures. "How much longer will we be saddled with her Ladyship?" Linda snapped.

At home, in front of Sally and their guest, small domestic difficulties produced monumental silences. By Thursday, they hardly spoke. Silent tension seemed almost natural to Linda, raised in a household with a secret mission in the heyday of the Cold War. Roy, used to active combat, found it maddening.

"Can I see you sing tonight?" Sally asked Olivia.

That evening, a concert version of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* was being given at Carnegie Hall. Olivia had seen it two hundred and five years before and had her heart set on seeing it again. They were, she, Roy and Linda, going into the city.

"Foolish girl," Olivia said. "Professional singers," a slight disdain in her tone, "will entertain us."

A day or two before, Linda would have made a note to explain to their guest that in this brave new world, professional singers were the aristocracy. That, as they spoke, a new king swiveled toward Memphis waiting to be crowned.

But this was no innocent herded upstream, dazed by all she saw around her. Lady Wexford needed no help from anybody.

"And you will get to stay with Dorrie whom you love," said Olivia. "And with Mrs. Wood," she added and suddenly asked, "What is your Mrs. Wood like?"

Before Linda could interrupt, Sally frowned and replied, "She's a TV."

As they parked, Roy said, "Train's here," jumped out of the car like he was escaping and came around for his kisses and hugs. Perfunctory for Linda, fervent in the case of his daughter. "See you ladies this evening," he said. Sally had eyes only for him as he bounded onto the platform, mingled with the crowd and boarded the 7:49.

Linda felt Roy on the train. He nodded to a pair of vets who were comparing Ike and MacArthur, slid into the seat behind them and buried himself in work. More than that she couldn't know.

His fellow commuters had learned all that men needed to find out about Roy from chance remarks exchanged in line at the hardware store, or leaning against a fence at a backyard barbecue. He was from the West Coast, had flown with the Air Force in Korea, had his own small import/export company and traveled a lot.

They rode the train together. But once in the city, all went their separate ways. They joked with Roy about how much time he spent out of his office. When Frank Hacker or George Stanley remembered that they were supposed to invite him to play golf that weekend, or solicit a contribution to the Fresh Air Fund, they would get his secretary, a formidable lady with a slight and unplaceable accent. Roy usually wouldn't return their calls until the end of the day.

Even catching him as they left the train at Grand Central wasn't possible. They might notice him, attaché case in hand, newspaper under his arm, walking through a now-crowded car as they pulled out of Pelham Manor. Asked, he'd mentioned getting off at 125th Street to see a man at Columbia University who translated his business correspondence with Iran.

Because he was so adept, but mainly because none of them could envision such a thing, no one ever saw Roy walk into time. That usually happened in the confusion of their imminent arrival in the city.

With a brisk step or two and the help of the train's motion, he would stride away from 1956. Sometimes he went up toward '59 for liaison with a neighboring Station Chief. Or back toward '50, a recurrent trouble spot where tensions were always near a boiling point.

That morning while Olivia, unaccompanied, sang *Froggy Went A-courting* to an audience of enraptured six-year-olds and their teacher, Linda wondered if she knew any more about her husband than did the men on the train.

When Olivia began the story of the *Ferryman and the Wolf*, Linda half-listened.

Once there was a ferryman who lived with his wife in a little house on a riverbank. When his son was born, the father asked the river to be

the boy's godfather. In answer, a stout tree branch floated ashore. The father carved it into a pole for his son.

Linda began to pay attention. Rangers were recruited as children. She recognized a tale of the Stream, worn smooth by passage up and down the human ages.

The boy grew up to be a ferryman also. He carried passengers from one side of the river to the other. The river was very wide and each day he could only make three trips one way and three trips the other. His boat was small and on each trip he could carry only one load beside himself.

The story was a riddle, a challenge. As she listened, Linda wondered if Lady Wexford told this more out of boredom than contempt, or the other way around.

One day a farmer asked him to carry a prize cabbage as big as a small child across the river where the king's own cook would give him a silver coin for it. The ferryman agreed. But before he could start out, a shepherd appeared with a hungry lamb and asked the ferryman to take her across the river to a field of clover. As payment the ferryman could have her wool which was soft as silk.

The ferryman agreed, but he noticed how the lamb looked at the cabbage and knew he must never leave them alone together. He was about to take the cabbage across when a wolf appeared with a sack on its shoulder and said, "Kind sir, I must cross the river. Carry me and I will give you what is inside this sack."

In this story of choice and chance, Linda noticed, only the wolf and the ferryman spoke. Only they were acting on their own behalf. Cabbage and lamb were just baggage.

The wolf looked longingly at the lamb, anxious to be left alone with her. The ferryman did not think long, but he did think hard. He put the lamb in the boat. Since he knew the wolf would never eat a cabbage, he left those two together. He carried the lamb across the river and on the way he sang:

*Oh river deep and river wide
Bring me swift to the other side*

The ferryman left the lamb. Returned. Picked up the cabbage and carried it across. As he did, he sang:

*Oh, river wide and river deep
I pray you safe my cargo keep*

The lamb was happy to see the cabbage. But the ferryman picked her up and took her back with him. When he got to the other bank, it was growing late. The wolf was overjoyed to see the lamb. But the ferryman told him to get in the boat. The wolf was very hungry, but he obeyed. As they went, the ferryman sang:

*Oh river brave and river swift
Please send a tide my hopes to lift*

The ferryman carried the wolf across and told him to guard the cabbage. The wolf agreed, thinking that when the ferryman returned with the lamb it would be dark and he would snatch his prey.

By the time the ferryman reached the lamb it was almost night and too late to make another trip. But he put the little beast aboard his boat and as he poled his way across he sang:

*Oh river swift and river brave
Grant me now a favoring wave*

And in the last moments of light, Godfather River reached up and bore the tiny craft from one side to the other faster than the eye can blink. The wolf was pacing back and forth on the other side.

As the sun fell and the boat put in to shore, the wolf leaped. But the ferryman took his stout pole and whacked him over the head so hard that the wolf dropped his sack and ran away.

The king's cook was so delighted with the giant cabbage that he gave the ferryman a bag of coins. And the lamb when he brought her to pasture yielded wool as soft as silk.

Over the heads of the children, Linda watched Lady Olivia look at Sally. The wolf and the lamb, she thought to herself. And the cabbage, she added, including herself.

So the ferryman brought home the coins and the wool and the sack to his wife and daughter. His wife opened the sack. And what was inside?

Oh, wine and sweets and a jeweled hen who laid a gold egg every morning and could tell your fortune. But The Ferryman's Wife is a tale for another time.

A story of desire, distortion of time, and even the hint of an oracle. With a happy ending. Real life would not be so nice. Linda was certain of one thing. Olivia and Sally would never be left alone together.

Dinner that evening was under the perpetual Christmas ornaments of the Russian Tea Room. The waiters, old and disdainful, each with an account of aristocratic privileges lost along with the Czar, were deferential around Roy. As if they instinctively detected a greater, scarier fraud than their own.

Over blini, caviar and vodka, Linda watched her husband lean forward and tell Olivia, "This place is a sentimental favorite of mine because of how my wife and I met."

The Englishwoman wore black and silver. A cameo at her throat showed an ivory profile set against rich blue. The blue caught the color of her eyes. "You mean to say you met in Russia. Two...Americans." She still hesitated on the word. She was amused, curious. Linda watched her.

"Not quite. In Budyatichi," said Roy. "A miserable town of shacks and mud, far enough into Poland for the population to be surprised when the Red Cavalry Army showed up." Roy's eyes grew somewhat misty. He had already put away two double martinis.

"Vladimir Khelemskya was my cover, a junior officer on General Budyonny's staff. A glorified dispatch rider. But I was twenty and this was my first independent Ranger assignment."

Linda shook her head. He refused to see this.

"A dashing young subaltern!" Olivia's expression was the same as that of the children hearing the story that morning, "When was this?"

"On a September day in a 1920," he said. "Always a dangerous passage in Eastern Europe. Things go badly that year but can get worse. The Russian Revolution must succeed but not triumph. In Budyatichi was an International Nursing Station where I had been told there would be allies with information of use to a Ranger. And who did I find?"

Linda looked at him furiously. He never hesitated.

"You were there?" Olivia, all surprise, asked Linda. "So far from home."

"A summer job, after sophomore year in college," Linda tried to sound bored. "Other kids were camp counselors, bummed around France. Because of my family connections, I ended up in a hot, dusty hellhole. People lived in filth and terror. No TV. No car. No shampoo. My supervisor was away that afternoon."

"So much for a Ranger undercover to do," Roy said. "False orders to deliver. Supplies to misdirect. Seeds of doubt to sow. Downstream college girls to seduce. Especially ones who thought they were going to give me orders." He laughed.

A man talks nostalgically about his youth, Linda knew, when his current life has hit a wall. She remembered that morning they met: the scent of wood smoke and the first hint of Autumn, the jingle of spur and slap of holster as he slung himself off his horse, his white teeth and blond mustache.

Once, when she was very young, Linda had been promised that she would know every mind but one. That first morning, she had reached out to touch his and almost jumped when she found she couldn't.

They had told her that far Upstream there was an implant that blocked telepathy. Just as they had warned her about Upstream boys supplemented in all kinds of ways that Mother Nature never intended. They had, in fact, told her just enough so that she had to see for herself.

"I was there," said Lady Olivia brightly, interjecting herself into a sudden silence. "In that very year you two were in Poland. At Hendom House outside London," she said. "I remembered the place from my childhood. My mother's sister, the Duchess of Dorset, lived there. I'd seen it burn. But in that 1920, it still stood and had become a kind of hospital."

Hendom House in 1920 on the Main Stream was a private hospital. The Rangers found it convenient to stash various casualties of their own among the trauma victims of the First World War. Linda knew that while recovering from her time with Lord Riot, Olivia Wexford had precipitated several fights and an actual duel between inmates.

Olivia arose. How well she knew the moment to leave a couple to talk about her. And to quarrel. Roy watched her elegant passage, a patron struck numb by the sight of her.

Linda tried to decide when these two had first rutted. Recently. That she knew. Tuesday morning, she decided. Roy had doubled back in time, returned shortly after they had left for the train. He and Olivia then

screwed amid the petticoats. Evidence of that, a stray footprint perhaps, was what he had compulsively scuffed away on Tuesday evening.

Roy took out his silver cigarette case, opened it and offered it to her. She shook her head. "You're talking too much," she said. "Upstream they can and will tell her whatever they want. Here we will maintain security."

"My impression was...." He drew on his Chesterfield, looked at her from under his lids, suddenly not from this place or time. "My impression was that you two exchanged girlish confidences."

"How much longer is she supposed to be here?"

"Current plans are that I'm to take her Upstream sometime next week."

"I want it sooner. I want it immediately."

"Yes, ma'am. I will do my best, ma'am. A Ranger always obeys. Okay?" He stared at her. Right through her.

So, Linda thought, the ferryman was bored with his job and wife. When the wolf turned out to be a vibrant creature with whom he shared a lot in common, nature took its course. They both felt tenderness for the lamb. Cried, perhaps, as they ate the stew. But both found it easy to ignore the cabbage. Only the lamb loved the cabbage.

She had made the classic mistake of anthropologists and time travelers, Linda realized, gotten too close to the locals and fallen into their pattern. She had become the numb suburban housewife.

Olivia, on her return, tried one of Roy's Chesterfields. "As a girl I'd half-imagined having my secret snuff box when I was old and double-chinned," she said. "Then, in that London where I stayed, everyone had these and thought them wonderful and wicked. I thought them disgusting." She inhaled, coughed, but inhaled again.

"I smoke a few a day," Roy told her. "Otherwise, I'd be remembered as the guy who doesn't smoke."

"And honor could not countenance that," said Lady Olivia.

They had been together again that afternoon, Linda knew. While she drove Sally over to stay with Dorrie. Roy could easily return to the house unnoticed. Rangers had their ways.

The only question was, which of the two had thought of sending the black truck to distract her.

"Can Auntie Olives come and see Mrs. Wood and Dorrie?" Sally had asked on the car ride that afternoon.

"I don't think she'll have time, honey," was Linda's answer.

3.

On Saturdays there was no 7:49. The nearest thing to it was an 8:03. No other trains stopped at Grove Hill for half an hour before or after. So it wasn't strange that a small knot of people had accumulated on the station platform. Most were locals with early appointments in the city. A few were strangers.

The man who sat in the Buick sedan reading the *Herald Tribune*, his tennis racket cases beside him, had doubtless driven over from another town to catch this particular train. The black woman plainly was returning to Harlem after serving at a party and sleeping over. The man in overalls carrying a tool case was somehow connected to the railway.

Today, Lady Wexford was being taken Upstream. Closer to the front. Closer to the point in time where humanity, of which she was so astounding and complicated an example, ceased to exist.

Pulling up at the station, Linda took in the Ranger deployment. She also spotted George and Alice Stanley standing beside a couple of suitcases. Alice, she remembered, was going up to Rhode Island to be with a sister who had just had a baby girl.

Roy saw them at the same moment and cursed under his breath. A jump in the Stream would already be difficult with a novice like Olivia. George and Alice would want to talk. The other Rangers would have to act as a buffer.

A few days before, Linda would have felt a pang of sympathy. Even now, shared memories and a child, an immense secret and a common assignment, had a hold. She was about to say something.

Then Olivia, in the back seat, sang almost under her breath:

*When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray
What charm can soothe her melancholy
What care can wash her guilt away?*

It's not her fall that she's been singing about, Linda realized. It's mine. She drove the Chevy right up to the station. They all got out and Roy went to the trunk for Olivia's luggage. The man in the Buick gathered up his tennis rackets.

The train came into view. The Stanleys and the other passengers looked that way while the maid and the railway man watched them and everything else.

Linda and Olivia kissed. "It saddens my heart not to see Sally again," the Englishwoman said. "Please give her this from me."

The wristlet was a beautiful thing, silk roses and tiny pearls. And familiar. Linda remembered seeing Olivia Wexford wearing nothing else. She noticed that the design was a bit off kilter. Was that spot, perhaps, royal blood?

Linda took the memento and stuck it in a pocket of her slacks. "I'll save it for when she's old enough to understand."

For the last couple of days Linda had not brought Sally back from Dorrie's. Not even to say good-bye.

Roy had the suitcases. He and Olivia had fucked in the rec room earlier that morning while Linda was out on errands. They hardly bothered to hide it.

"We caught the truck driver," Linda said. "This morning." She had both of their attention. "He was waiting when I left the house. I let him follow me. Mrs. Wood and I took what he knew."

She watched their reactions. "It wasn't much. He thought he was the look-out man in a kidnapping. That a rich grandfather would give a million dollars to ransom Sally."

Roy's eyes flashed with fury. Because Sally had been threatened. Because someone had tried to do this to HIS daughter. Because Linda was always right.

"The driver?" he asked.

"Done," Linda said and he nodded. She'd wanted this to be none of his doing. But she'd had to make sure.

She couldn't read Olivia's face. Brushing the other's mind, she caught a glimpse of a silk screen. On it, in the softest of colors, a nymph, covered by a flimsy drapery, glanced back at a pursuing Bacchus. And Linda, even in anger, could not violate what was reserved to a god.

The train pulled into the station. Linda caught Olivia in an embrace, turned her away from Roy and whispered, "You mentioned *The Tale of the Ferryman's Wife*. Well we're in that story now and she is a bitch with a long memory. If anything happens to Sally, no matter what, no matter when, I'll find you and tear out your breath."

"The wolf loves only the lamb," Lady Wexford murmured, took a step backward, turned and went up to the platform between the man with the tennis rackets and Roy who carried her bags. Neither she nor Roy looked back.

Linda drove away from the station and watched the train depart in her rearview mirror. From then on, whenever she thought of Roy on the September morning when they met, she would also remember him hauling Lady Wexford's luggage Upstream.

Roy would be back this evening and Sally would be there. He and Linda would wind up this operation quickly and go their separate ways. If he'd given even a hint of having sent that truck and driver to distract her, he would never have been allowed near their daughter again.

She drove not home but over to East Radley. On the way, she passed the spot where the crumpled black truck had run full speed into a concrete and steel overpass support. The body had been removed. The county police were waving traffic around the accident scene.

A few hours before, the man at the wheel, following Linda intently, had reached the outer fringe of Mrs. Wood's awareness. The goddess revealed herself to him as he sped off the exit. Stunned and agape, he spiraled out of control. As he did, Linda laid open the vicious, stupid mind. He knew very little. Still, it was too much. The truck crumpled, but he was already dead. Linda drove home to her husband and her guest.

On her second trip, she noticed flowers and spring greenery adorning the statue of the Virgin in the Italians' yard on the corner. She parked before the tall gray house with the swings and slide in the back yard.

"He always wanted action. He hated it here," Linda said a while later. She sat in the kitchen drinking tea. The house was quiet. The other children, the ordinary children, were at home that day. Sally was back in the conservatory with Mrs. Wood. Dorrie listened, endlessly patient and kind.

"He once told me that riding herd on the Cold War, making sure that Ike gets two full terms and Khrushchev comes to power, is like near beer

when you're used to iced vodka. It could be a tabloid headline: 'Time Wars Break up Marriage!'" Linda started to laugh, but instead began to cry.

Dorrie was the perfect avatar. She was like a well. Linda wondered if she could ever learn to be like her. "My mother didn't bring me to the Goddess until I was almost twelve," Linda said. "Mrs. Wood looked to me like the most amazing black and silver movie publicity shot ever made. A face beautiful but impossible to pin down. Tony Curtis and Debbie Reynolds and everyone else all rolled into one. She touched me and I was hers. It was that simple."

That's how it went for a while, Dorrie refilling the tea cup, nodding at a familiar tale, Linda alternating giggles and tears.

"That first day I met Roy. After we got intimately acquainted, I asked Mrs. Wood how long he'd be faithful. She said, 'As long as he can be. And to no one as faithful as you.' Because I was young that sounded like more than enough."

Eventually, Linda breathed more calmly and all was silent in the kitchen. Then the door to the conservatory slammed open and Sally called, "Mommy! Mrs. Wood told my fortune!"

As her daughter came tripping down the hall, Linda caught the image. Gray and magic as TV, it showed Sally older. Seven at least. Wearing a robe of stars. Perhaps a school play. Maybe something more. The question was, where and when?

"Can I have my cookie now?" Sally burst into the room, hugged Linda, then remembered and asked Dorrie, "Please?"

Dorrie smiled and drew the cloth off a still-warm figure with a frosting dress and raisin eyes. She and Linda exchanged glances. The older woman nodded. Linda rose and went down the hall.

She remembered that her mother had waited too long to tell her the truth. About the Rangers. About the Time Stream. Linda had cried. Threatened to run away. Her mother had also delayed bringing her to Mrs. Wood until then.

Until today Linda had been able to see no reason for that. With puberty, her gift was apparent. The alliance of necessity between Rangers and Oracle was a long standing one. Shrines of the Goddess were within easy reach of any Ranger operative.

Now she knew more than she wanted to about alliances made

Upstream. She had learned that the Gods could give the Rangers Lady Olivia. And, in return, the Rangers could give Lady Olivia Roy. She understood too her own mother's reluctance. Mrs. Wood had opened Linda's mind that first day and it had never again been entirely her own.

On that first occasion, Mrs. Wood had promised, **You will know every mind but one.** Ah, but the Oracle was deep. Or just slippery. Seven years after that, almost to the day, Linda had encountered Roy and imagined that his mind was that one. In the seven years that followed, Linda encountered others whose thoughts she could not catch. Only now, thinking about it, did she realize that the one mind was her own.

At the conservatory door, Linda bowed slightly before the Presence, then stepped forward into the warmth and sunlight. Here, where Chance and the Seasons merged, she would learn the nature of her new assignment.

4.

They talked for a time in Grove Hill about Roy and Linda Martin. Even in a nation founded on rootlessness, the speed with which they disappeared was remarkable. The Stanleys, George and Alice, often described their Saturday morning train trip with Roy and the exotic house guest.

"I knew," she would say, "just by the way they avoided us."

"At Grand Central," he would add. "No sign of them."

Olivia was never seen again. Roy returned but not for long. He was busy winding up his affairs. When pressed, he talked about taking over an uncle's business in Seattle. Linda said something about going to stay with her family.

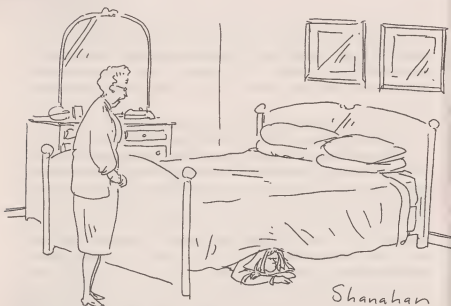
Divorce would, in a few years, be as common as babies were right then. But Roy and Linda Martin's marriage was the first this circle had seen collapse. Marge Hacker, who lived right in back of them, described the distance she observed. "Not a smile. Not a touch. They talk to each other through the kid."

Time passed and neighbors moved away from Grove Hill. But when Marge Hacker and Alice Stanley met by chance at a church rummage sale in Rye ten years later, it was the Martins they talked about. Rather than

discuss their own marital woes, they recalled how quickly the house had been sold, how abruptly little Sally was taken out of school.

A decade farther Upstream, as the protean nation of the West continued to change and transform itself, George Stanley and Frank Hacker met for lunch. Both were on their second marriages. George said, "Tried to get in touch with Roy once or twice, to maybe ask him about that British bimbo."

And Frank smiled at his memory of Lady Olivia on an April evening and of a time and place gone by as fast as a lighted window seen at night from a speeding train. ♣



*"I can sympathize, dear, but you knew
he was the bogeyman when you married him."*

Raymond Steiber is the sort of person who lets his stories speak for themselves. His "Dry August" appeared in our 1995 issue. His new one is a brief and powerful tale.

Achronicity

By Raymond Steiber

THEY SAID TO ME: "THE T'KAI have no words for time. They also appear not to die. We're sending you to investigate."

The surface of their planet was continuously bathed in radiation from the many nearby suns. There was no sunset, no dawn. No one should have been able to live there, but the T'kai seemed to prosper.

I wore a protective suit so thick that auxiliary motors were necessary to move the arms and legs. My rest periods were spent in an eight-by-six tomb of lead. The tomb's electronics were old-fashioned and half mechanical because the radiation ate up anything more advanced. When I closed my eyes, there were flashes of light against the inner sides of my eyelids. A leak somewhere, a leak that might kill me if I didn't find it.

The Northern Tribe accepted my presence without any fuss or bother. Where there was no time, where there was no death, there was also no fear of strangers. Their language was simple and easy to master. All you had to remember was that it had no whens in it, no nows, no yesterdays or tomorrows.

They were a squat humanoid race with purplish-brown skin. The females had appendages like udders just beneath their ribs. They not only fed their young with them, they fed every non-female in the tribe. That was because they were the only eaters, the only sex that could digest the thick rubbery grass. In fact, that was the tribal name for female. Eater. Grazer.

The H'do, the leader, patiently answered my questions. Or to be more accurate, patiently failed to answer them.

"If you never die, why do you need to have young?"

"What is young? What is never? What is die?"

These were not the words I used because they had no such words. Rather I approached these words through gesture and simile and circumlocution.

"Why are there not more of you? If you never die and you continue to reproduce, you should have filled the planet by now."

"What is now? What is die?"

He paused a moment and stared at me with eyes that saw not in the visible spectrum but in the region of X-rays.

"What is planet?"

The females grazed. The males sat in circles and chanted or sat alone lost in a mindless torpor. In season they impregnated the females with their comical sexual equipment.

As there was no tomorrow, they need not plan for it.

As there was no death, they suffered no anxiety nor did they feel the need for a religion.

"What happens when the grass fails?" I asked.

"What is when?"

I tried again. "Grass fails. Females receive no sustenance. You receive no sustenance. Everybody starves."

He stared at me, puzzled.

"Grass is not failed," he said.

During rest periods — when the flood of radiation static permitted it — I called the mother ship.

"I'm learning nothing. Their language is too simple for my questions. You were right. Entropy has been violated and there appears to be no death."

Then I lay in my darkened tomb watching the flashes of light. Frequently I was sick. I was sick when I went outside in my protective suit. I had to rig a catch bag beneath my chin.

They don't die, I thought. But I will.

I called the mother ship.

"Take me out of this place. I'm ill. There's a leak somewhere in the shielding and I can't find it."

A single message came back through the rattling pop of the static. Continue your mission.

I did a headcount of the tribe.

"There are less of you," I told the H'do.

"Some go with the dancers."

"What are the dancers?"

He imitated their strange awkward step, then stared at me as if trying to communicate their nature with his eyes.

"When the dancers come again, you must tell me so that I can observe them."

"What is when?"

I returned to the tomb where I was violently ill. I spent an extra rest period there, trying to recover. I was losing weight because I could no longer eat solid food.

I pleaded with my masters over the communicator.

"Take me off this planet."

And over the pop and hiss, contin — mis —

I began to feel very weak. I spent hours like the T'kai males sitting in a torpor. Once I wasted an entire day — my time, not the planet's — watching the females graze. There was nothing bovine in their grazing nor did it resemble human feeding. It was wholly their own, wholly alien, wholly T'kai.

I did another headcount. Again there were less. I went to the H'do.

"The dancers — have they come again?"

He pointed off in the distance with his alien hand. "There — do you see?"

There was a line of T'kai far off. They moved with an awkward rocking motion, first left, then right. Their feet fell heavily as if trying to nail themselves to the ground. They were dancers all right — dancers in zombie-like slow motion.

I followed after them. My motor driven suit moved on its own, allowing me simply to hang there, sweating and sick, as I tracked their progress.

I followed them for many hours through the tall grass beyond where the females grazed. I went on as long as I could, then turned back with my terrible knowledge.

As soon as I got back to the tomb, I went to the communicator.

"Can you hear me out there? CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Nothing but the sound of static rain.

"There *is* death here, but it happens where the healthy don't see it. The dying come by in small groups, and the desperately ill rise up and follow them. They move for hours through the tall vegetation, one group after another. At each step another of them dies until there are none left. I have seen their mummified bodies where the grass has sucked all the nutrients from them and replenished itself. I have seen them in their thousands — in their millions. Entropy is not violated. Death is alive and well throughout the universe. *Now will you take me out of here?*"

No answer but the static rain.

Then: *Continue your mission.*

I could keep no food down at all now and very little in the way of liquids. My hair came out in bunches. For days — *my* days — I lay sweating and naked in my leaden tomb. My mind seemed to drift off somewhere in the darkness and grow dim and diffuse. Then far off I heard a feeble cry. Not a real cry, but an emanation of the very atmosphere.

The dancers are coming, I thought. They're coming for *me*.

I got into my protective suit — slowly, a centimeter at a time. I activated the servo motors. I left my tomb and sought out the H'do.

I stood before him, swaying.

"I'm dying," I said.

"What is dying?"

I could see the dancers, approaching from afar. I pointed at them.

"*That* is dying."

I began getting out of my protective suit.

"You go with the dancers?" the H'do asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't have the energy.

I took a long time getting out of the suit. Long enough for the dancers

to make their slow, awkward approach. Eventually — somehow — I stood naked and swaying beside their path. Already the bath of radiation was turning my skin a purplish brown.

The dancers were abreast of us now. I took a step forward, then another step. I joined the end of the line. It was easy to follow their dance. It was my dance now. We moved off into the grasslands, leaving the H'do behind.

Soon the radiation took my sight away. No matter. Who needed sight for this sort of dance? In my ears I heard the static — or was it merely the whisper of the tall grass? In my ears I heard a voice far off.

Continue your mission, it said.



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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

CONFESSIONS OF A CRAP WATCHER

TERRIBLE things have been happening to dead science fiction writers in Hollywood, but none have suffered so badly as Phillip K. Dick — if that is not absolutely true now, it soon will be, for it's impossible to find a Dick story or novel that is not currently under option. *Blade Runner*, for all its atmospheric and visual bravura, and despite several interesting supporting performances, reduced the source novel (a meditation on the first of Dick's major themes: What exactly defines a human being?) into an exercise in style and fully introduced us to Harrison Ford's leaden period. *Total Recall*, apart from a few moments that spoke to Dick's other major theme, the nature of reality, fell prey to director Paul Verhoeven's compulsive need to lampoon the violence of his adopted country and became

merely another Schwarzenegger vehicle. *Screamers* took Dick's tale of machine-created humans (sympathetic creatures with authentic personalities, perhaps even souls) used as bombs and poozled it into Grade Z slumgullion flavored with the remnants of lead actor Peter Weller's career. And there looks to be worse in the offing. Imagine, if you will, the gag-inducing sentiment and trollish comic excesses that Roberto Benigni will bring to "The Short, Happy Life of the Brown Oxford," a story about a scientist who invents a machine that brings inanimate objects to life ("Hey! My shoe...It's a talkin'! It's a wants an Odoreater!") And then we have *Minority Report*, a story concerning pre-cog crime fighters who detect murders before they occur, a notion that — word has it — Steven Spielberg has transformed into yet another timecop movie, this one

starring America's frat boy, the engagingly talentless Tom Cruise. Toss in *Imposters*, Dick's account of a human scientist hunted by aliens, one of whom has usurped his place, a film that several A-list scriptwriters tried unsuccessfully to doctor and which since has been yanked from distribution, and you will gather that Dick's immediate cinematic future is to consist of megablasts of brightly hued, hack-writer-generated meadow muffin, augmented by great glorioso dollops of Flatulaphonic sound, aimed at an undiscerning popcorn-feeding subspecies that can be found grazing the multiplexes with its young, living proof that Dick's first major theme still has relevance in contemporary society.

The sad thing about these movies, past, present, and future, is that they have lifted the external trappings of Dick's work, the settings and plots and quasi-scientific premises, yet contain (or promise to contain) little of its soul, none of the caustic black humor and enlightened-loser sensibility that inform the majority of his characters. The one film that manages this to any marked degree is *Barjo*, a French film loosely based on Dick's novel *Confessions of a Crap Artist*. Barjo is a borderline dysfunctional

thirtyish man convinced that the world is coming to an end, an innocent whacko who nourishes himself by sniffing a plastic bag full of milk bottle caps as though they were oxygen. He spends much of his days cataloguing on tape and in notebooks the behavior of his beautiful, perversely unhappy, and equally erratic sister Fan-Fan. She is married to the prosperous owner of an aluminum factory, Charles, and amorously pursues Gwen and Michael, a young couple who live nearby. Her motives in this extramarital chase are less the product of desire than they are the natural outgrowth of a frustration at her own pointless existence and, subsequently, the instrument of a kind of psychological terrorism — she seems determined to drive Charles crazy, and Charles, a classic tight-ass who becomes enraged whenever Fan-Fan asks him to pick up feminine hygiene products at the drugstore, eventually suffers a heart attack and is hospitalized. While in the hospital, Charles is visited by Barjo, who reads him sections of his file on Fan-Fan, complete with dialog samples, that testify to her infidelity. In his spare time, Barjo communes with a group of fellow nutballs who share his conviction about the impending apocalypse —

they hold seances during which they attempt to communicate with the Superior Beings in their UFOs. Though clearly deluded, if not deranged, Barjo's friends and their pre-occupations, their observances, are given credence by director Jerome Boivin, and this is faithful to Dick's contention that the mad focus upon things ignored by the sane and thus they may see more clearly — albeit infrequently — the secret orderings of the world.

I'm not sure that *Barjo* comes to much in the end. It's scarcely more than a slice of demented life, topped off by a climactic scene in which Charles returns home intending to kill Fan-Fan and instead slaughters the family pets — horse, dog, ducks, sheep, and so on — before succumbing to a second heart attack. Yet it serves to convey the quirky specificity and spirit of Dick's obsessions. His various paranoidias, his belief in the general insanity of our species (in particular, the madness between men and women), the absurd configuration of even the most commonplace events, in themselves shadows of a vastly absurd but eminently vital divinity...all of Dick's tropes and archetypes are here fleshed out, and though there is not much of a framework to support them, they suffice

on their own to create a fascinating ninety minutes. If the director of some future action movie based on Dick material would incorporate *Barjo's* weird humanity and soulfulness, we might have a pop-culture masterpiece on our hands. As things stand, what we do have is the new Schwarzenegger flick.

It's not that *The Sixth Day* is a bad movie...well, actually it is, but that's almost a given, considering the Schwarzenegger factor, and the real question one anticipates that viewing it will answer is whether it's a good bad movie, whether it's (A) the kind of junkfood entertainment that will persuade you to sit uncomplaining for a couple of hours, your mind disengaged and your eyes lit by dopey on-screen explosions, or (B) the sort of godawful mess that causes lovers of camp to switch on the VCR, toke up, and laugh sneeringly at, say, Geena Davis's ludicrous inappropriateness in the role of the pirate queen of *Cut-throat Island*, or any recent film featuring Kevin Costner. There is no doubt that *Day* rates a ten on the Doltometer, being rife with fist-cuffs, gunplay, chase scenes, and blow-up, and there are a number of outstanding unintentionally comic moments, notably Arnold's variant pronunciations of the name of his

dog, Oliver ("Ah-lee-vur," "Ohl-vur," etc.) and the poignant moment when our hero's clone gazes wistfully into the camera and intones with Frankensteinestiffness, "Ahm I really human? Do I have a so-wul?" But sad to say, this is no *Predator*, no *Terminator*, films whose rawness and lack of pretension contrived to breed actual suspense. *Day* is a completely cynical example of moviemaking by the numbers, following a wearisome rhythm of chase explosion chase, chase chase bloodydeath, kick two three turn, kick two three turn, that goes a little something like this....

In the near future ("Sooner than you think" cautions an introductory line of text — intending, I suppose, to evoke a shudder of dread from all us doomed terwilligers), genetic rebop has become such an everyday deal that a thriving business is done in cloning housepets. Human cloning, however, is illegal. Doing research into the subject is forbidden, carrying a forty-year prison term. But multi-billionaire yuppie scum Michael Drucker (Tony Goldwyn) views the matter differently. He has coerced a scientist, Dr. Griffin Weir (Robert Duvall), into cloning humans on a massive scale, allowing him to re-

place his security forces and even the star quarterback of his pro football team whenever they are killed or seriously injured (which is often, leading one to ask that if Drucker is such a poor judge of muscle, how in the hell did he become such a dominant captain of industry?). Drucker charts a heli-jet service to take him into the mountains for snowboarding and is there assassinated by a member of a fanatic anti-cloning organization. His pilot is also killed, and once Drucker's clone is brought to life — the work of a few hours — he orders the pilot cloned in order to cover up the incident. Trouble is, the place of the scheduled pilot, Adam Gibson (Schwarzenegger), has been taken by his partner (Michael Rapaport), and the wrong man is cloned, thus giving us a brace of mesomorphic Adam Gibsons: you'd think that somewhere along the line somebody might have noticed a slight discrepancy in size and shape between the men, but hey, logic has taken a two-hour holiday, and if you're going to start quibbling about this kind of thing, you won't make it through the first fifteen minutes.

And so begins the hunting, the chasing, the skull-busting, the bleeding, the exploding, eventually

culminating in Drucker's downfall and the revelation that the point-of-view character is Adam Gibson's clone, and the man he thought was a clone is the real Adam Gibson, something that has been made obvious early on, the scriptwriters apparently being unable to distinguish between foreshadowing an event and telegraphing it. There are a few decent bits. Rodney Rowland is appropriately sullen and seedy as a bungling Drucker minion who keeps getting killed; Duvall, albeit underused, lends a touch of class; and Goldwyn is nastily self-absorbed and extremely hateable, though it would be nice if the apt but overdone practice of costuming villains in designer garb popular amongst Hollywood players — black shirts and slacks bearing fabulous Italian labels — would be put to rest.

Director Roger Spottiswoode has done entertaining action films before, and it's hard to tell if he just didn't care about this one, or if he was simply incapable of overcoming the handicaps presented by the script and the woeful performance of his leading man — whatever, *Day* has none of the amphetamine pacing that fueled his Bond film, *Tomorrow Never Dies*. There is, in fact, a tedious sameness and comi-

cal ineptitude to the violence, both in context of the genre and the film itself — sparking laser guns (straight out of Japanese trash sci-fi), neck breaking, screaming stunt falls. Considering the Schwarzeneggerian budget of the film, you'd expect at least one nifty variation on the theme of mayhem, but the best Spottiswoode can muster is a heli-jet blade chopping with the gore implied, not shown, this due to Le Gran Arnold's pompous and much publicized intent to make movies that won't cause American kiddies to wax murderous and sally forth to dice and slice innocent high school jocks with their own personal heli-jet blades. (Thanks, Big Guy. Perhaps a dose of good ol' Austrian morality, the same that inspired much of recent European history, will stave off our cultural decline.)

In Schwarzenegger's best action work, he has played an implacable, unstoppable force, and on two occasions (*Twins* and *Kindergarten Cop*), he has been somewhat effective at light comedy. His attempts at portraying your average family/working man 250-pound muscle freak behemoth, such as his role in *Total Recall*, have been considerably less successful. *Day* establishes, if ever there was a doubt, that Arnold has the emotive ability

of string cheese. His take on normal guyness is absolutely gruesome — the ferocious leer he displays after blowing out the candles on his birthday cake during a surprise party would give the Blair Witch the willies. But more significantly, he does not seem quite so unstoppable. Past fifty now, not long removed from heart surgery, he has the seamed, fatigued look of an old rhino forced to make a final charge. Given this, it's going to take Vincent Price's old makeup man to get Arnold ready for his part in the next Terminator movie, unless they're planning to call it *T-3: The Rusting*.

Okay...So. The villain dies, Earth is saved (from what, it's unclear), Arnold and his clone become pals, then Mr. Olympia's cell brother heads off happily to a life of his own in South America — this is where the "Do I have a so-wul?" line comes in, the one simplistic Dickian note in two solid hours of was-that-fun-or-what brain sludge. Yet I strongly felt there was more here than met the eye, because, you see, I'm convinced that no matter how artless they may appear, these twelfth-of-a-day-long bright projections of flicker-flicker in our eyes are beaming the master's words, the mind-deadening syllables of light that coerce us into the accep-

tance of some unpleasant state of affairs. Even a *merde-fest* like the one just witnessed.

Day's message is both rudimentary and deceptive. Although on the surface the film appears to be saying that life is a sacred matter, cloning is wrong, there are things men are not meant to know blah blah blah, the happy survival of the Schwarzenclone caused me to realize that the actual message was another volley in the class war, stating an imperative of the near future: Cloning Is Wrong For You. "You" meaning everyone but the privileged and those they favor. Call me paranoid, but I have long been convinced that the power-mad little humbugs who rule the dummyverse are preparing us for the "sooner than you think" day when a trillion proles live out their mayfly spans in a dreary lower depth of slave-making drugs, on-the-fritz neon, hallucinatory marketing zones, soul-killing entertainments, and deadly pollution, while the wealthy, sustained by enzymes looted from Third World babies and backed up by a dozen or so spare bodies each, enjoy an ersatz immortality during which all human progress will come to a screeching halt except for subtle refinements in style, a world in which pampered, genetically enhanced dogs

will learn to read but most humans will not, and university degrees will be offered in the disciplines of fashion sense and mockery. Chances are, not too many of us will notice the difference.

The end credits rolled, and a characterless rock song blasted from the screen, designed to orchestrate a march of the zombies out of the theaters and into the night—though sitting in my living room, I felt the call of the music and went shuffling forth, seeking nourishment of a sort I could not name. I wandered for a while but soon found myself passing through the doors of a club whose decor was a mixture of film noir and high tech, a digital hell pulsing with dance noise, populated by guylike bug creatures with creepy tattoos and living flesh modules with little-girl breasts and big girl eyes, both displaying an excess of hair dye and lots of significant piercings. Speech was a communal howl, the bathroom door opened onto a hotly lit sidereal reality, and the bartender posed a cryptic shadow against what an unwitting soul might take for an illuminated mirror but was in truth an illusion cast by a malefic device of unguessable origin. None of this seemed in the least familiar. I ordered bourbon and ice at the bar. In

the fraudulent mirror I saw eye contracts being made, hulking refugees from the lava moon disguised as bouncers, waitress vampires, packages of pure poison being passed from hand to hand. I began to suspect that *Day* had transmitted a more profound and transforming message than the one I had parsed, seeding me with a virulent paranoia, or perhaps that an accumulation of such movies had overloaded my program, shorted out my mental baffles, allowing me to see that the cautionary future was upon us. More likely, I thought, contact with Dick's sensibility, even the ersatz variety provided by *Day*, had quickened me, established a resonance between our realities, because it was evident to me now that his spirit was moving through the land. We were living on the cusp of the teeming, malodorous time and place he had perceived from the vantage point of 1968. In the organ-harvesting, growing-criminal-underclass moment, in the Pandora's-box-opening, just barely pre-genetic-revolution Now. Dickworld. And it sucked every bit as much as he told us it would. On my right an attractively sleazy, bewigged woman wearing a few ounces of mascara, nine rings, and a funeral dress lit a cigarette and exhaled a plume of

smoke, an action that simultaneously destroyed a galaxy hidden in a dust mote suspended in the air above her and signaled her availability. To my left a sour-smelling, ragged shadow, its face obscured by dreadlocks, all except a glaring, jaundiced eye, reached out an obsidian talon to lift a silver droplet of something from the scarred wood of the countertop, then touched it to its lips and gave out with a glutinous hiss. I stared down into my drink, ice melting in a brown sea, and

shivered. This was serious. I would have to write faster, I would have to get it all out, warn everyone. Black flowers bloomed in the creases on my forehead; the red wine in the bewigged woman's glass bubbled like a hot spring. A Great Inversion was at hand, and people needed to know this, they needed to know a good many things, including the one thing they all thought they knew but never truly accepted. There was no time to waste. At any moment a Terminator might appear. ☞



"Wow! What an awful dream I just had!"

Mr. Sheckley traveled to Rumania in 1999, where he was able to view the total eclipse from the rooftop of the Continental Hotel in Timisoara. He says he penned this tale as a passenger in a car ride through Rumania during a rainstorm. We hope it's not autobiographical.

A Trick Worth Two of That

By Robert Sheckley

THERE HAD BEEN A LOT OF traffic at first, but now our car was the only one on the road. We'd left Timisoara in the late morning, after a

viewing of the last total eclipse of 1999. Unfortunately, a cloud had obscured the sun at the key moment. Silviu claimed he'd seen a glimpse of the diamond ring, as the flaring feature on the eclipsed sun is called. I had not noticed it myself, but had been impressed by the dramatic darkening of the sky, the sudden clamor of bewildered birds, and the coolness that for a few minutes replaced the stifling heat of the last days.

Now, several hours later, we were most of the way across Rumania, not far from the Hungarian border. Helene and I were on our way back to Venice, where we would return to our small villa on the Lido. Our friends would go on to their apartment in Milan, and Silviu would return to the university.

For days, the heat had been relentless, and the sky a clear blue up to the day of the eclipse. But today, a weather system had moved in and the sky was white. The traffic, which had clogged the narrow two-lane roads

and slowed our progress, had diminished with the oncoming rain, light at first, then heavy and relentless. Now we were the only car on what passed for the main road to Budapest. We had entered the region of Transylvania. Dark, gray-white mists clung to the mountains and crept down toward the road in thick tendrils, like the tentacles of an enormous ectoplasmic octopus.

Silviu, who was driving, was growing alarmed at the conditions. He was muttering to himself, peering through the windshield through the rivulets of water that the wipers could scarcely manage, and nervously plucking at his shirt with gestures that I took to be surreptitious signs of the cross. I knew Silviu as a modern man, a scientist, a member of the Romanian Academy of Sciences. Yet something in him seemed to be moved, atavistically, perhaps, by our lonely journey through these mountains of evil omen. My wife Helene, sitting beside Silviu and me in the front seat, seemed abstracted and was nervously chewing on her lower lip. Our Italian friends, Giulio and Gina, in the back, had been laughing and chatting, and munching biscuits which they had purchased at the last AGIP station. But presently, as the rain increased and the sky darkened with the approach of evening, even these light-hearted creatures fell silent.

Torrents of water cascaded down, forming small lakes on the road which our car passed over and through with a hiss. Here and there, the low stone retaining walls on the mountainside had given way, and our car passed over an ever-increasing accumulation of twigs, pebbles, and small branches.

The flooding grew worse as we continued. A deserted car park had become a lake, empty except for one white plastic chair floating in it. Thunder came down with a crack. The skies lighted momentarily with lightning.

And then the catastrophe we had all been expecting happened. We rounded a bend and Silviu brought the car to a quick stop. Ahead of us, a pile of rocks and tree limbs had come down the mountainside, blocking the road completely. Rocks were still falling, tumbling down the steep slope in a steady stream. There would be no getting to Budapest by tonight.

"What now?" I asked.

Silviu said, "There was a turnoff a hundred yards or so back. Do you remember seeing it?"

I nodded. "It slanted up the mountain, as I recall."

"Yes, I think so. But it was macadamized. I think it might go in parallel with this road."

"Worth a try," I said. "If it looks bad, we can always park for the night."

We were all in agreement. We backed up cautiously to the turnoff. It seemed safe enough, so we turned up the mountain at not too steep an angle.

THE ROAD WAS good for a while, but in half a mile the macadam ended and we were on a dirt track. The surface was beginning to wash out. Any time now we were likely to get trapped. The car was sliding from one side to the other. There was some danger of going over the edge, down a steep hillside to our destruction. Silviu kept the car barely at a crawl, his hands tense on the wheel. Conversation had stopped. The Italians in the back seat were silent, Giulio, the young engineer, and Gina, his fashionable wife, gripping each other's hands, their faces tight and concerned. Beside me in the front seat, Helene's face, lighted by flashes of lightning, was pale and drawn.

It looked as though we would have to stop and spend the night in the car. We had no provisions to speak of — half a liter of mineral water, and a few not very good Rumanian cookies we had picked up at the last gas stop. There wasn't enough room in the car for all of us to lie down. We would have to spend the night sitting up. Not the worst of disasters, but something to be avoided all the same.

I was remembering tales I had heard of these Transylvanian mountains. Giulio, in the back seat, as though echoing my thoughts, wondered aloud how far we were from the castle of Vlad the Impaler. Gina laughed, a little shakily. "That's no more than a tourist attraction nowadays."

We all laughed. But it became obvious that Silviu didn't find this sort of talk amusing.

He said, "It is true that Vlad is only a legend now. But strange things still go on in this region. They don't come to the attention of the world outside Rumania. They're barely noted in Bucharest, where people have other things to think about. But the common wisdom is, inexplicable

things still happen around here. It is a region best avoided. Especially on nights like this."

It was full dark now, the blackness of the mountainside contrasting eerily with the white mist. We were just deciding to stop. The going was simply too treacherous, with a precipice on the right and the steep, heavily wooded mountain on the left. But there was no place to turn out. We wondered, should we continue, looking for a place to pull off the road? Or just stop where we were? It was unlikely any other vehicle would be traveling this road on a night like this. Still, it called for a decision, and meanwhile Silviu kept the car barely creeping along, trying to make out the edges of the road through the streams of water pouring down the windshield.

Suddenly I saw a flashing light up ahead. Silviu saw it at the same time, and slowed the car still more, until it began to buck in low gear.

"What's that?" Helene asked, while the others crowded forward to see.

"I have no idea," Silviu said. "But we might as well find out." He slowed slightly again, because the car was now slipping and sliding badly on the dirt track.

"Gear up," Giulio advised, and Silviu shifted up to second, getting slightly better traction.

At last we came up to the light and saw that it was a man, dressed in a long rain slicker and waving a flashlight. We stopped and Silviu wound the window down. There followed a brief conversation in what I took to be Rumanian. At the end of it, Silviu groaned and pounded the steering wheel with his fist.

The man said, in English, "I was telling your friend that this road leads nowhere. It comes to an end in another two miles. And it is unsafe even in good weather. Didn't you see the warning sign?"

"It must have washed out," I said. "What do you suggest?"

"Come ahead another twenty yards," the man said. "There is a road to the left up into the mountain. Dirt, but passable. I have my lodge there. I suggest you spend the night with me."

"A lodge? Here at the end of nowhere?"

"Only a few rooms are completed," the man said. "When it is all done, and the road hardened, my hotel will have the finest view in these mountains. Not that you can see much of it now."

"Your lodge is a hotel?"

"It will be. The finest in the region. But in the meantime, even in its present state, it is a better place for you than out here in the weather. If you agree, I will lead you to my drive."

It seemed the best option. Silviu followed the man, crawling along in low gear to a turnoff twenty yards ahead. Then we climbed again up a high-crowned dirt road, our wheels sliding treacherously, Silviu wrestling with the wheel to keep us out of the runoff ditches on either side. At last the road leveled out into a broad clearing, and at the end of it was a partially finished structure.

Flashes of lightning revealed a small hotel constructed in what I took to be an old Rumanian style with elaborate carvings. The lower floor was lighted, and our host stood in front of the doorway, waving us in with his flashlight.

We came inside, soaked by even that short an exposure to the rain. Our host had towels at hand to dry ourselves off. He was of average height, broad but not portly, balding, and with a round, cheerful face. He introduced himself.

"I am Ioan Florin. Welcome to my hotel. It is still incomplete, as I told you, but I can offer you beds for the night, and dinner, if you are not too choosy."

We thanked Florin. I asked him, "How did you know we were coming?"

"I didn't know, of course," Florin said. "But I was looking out over the landscape from one of the upper windows and saw your headlights coming up from the road below. Since I know this road leads nowhere except to here, and I am not yet officially opened for business, I deduced you were travelers in need of assistance, and acted accordingly."

Florin prepared a dinner for us — a tasty goulash soup that reminded us we were not far from the Hungarian border. This, with chunks of bread and a local white wine, and finishing with a dish resembling apple strudel, satisfied our hunger, which had grown intense during the hours on the road.

Afterward, before retiring, Florin invited us into his parlor, a large, cheerful room that took up most of the finished portion of the downstairs.

Here, with small glasses of the local plum brandy, we settled back and unwound from our ordeal.

Florin proved to be a good conversationalist as well as an excellent host. Born in this region but educated in Bucharest, he had worked for some years in Budapest in an uncle's hotel business. He spoke Hungarian and German as well as Rumanian and English, and was a treasure trove of local folklore.

Our talk turned inevitably to stories of old Transylvania — of the horrifying Vlad the Impaler, whose castle was not far from here, of Elizabeth Bathory and her penchant for taking rejuvenating baths in the blood of young servant maids, and others, less well known but equally unsavory. From there we moved on to vampires, succubi, and other unclean creatures of the night.

Silviu didn't like this line of talk. "These legends," he said, "are part of the old folklore of this area. And the world is entranced with them still. But their main use is to entertain adults and frighten children. Nowadays we know that there is no such thing as supernatural phenomena, and that one part of this Earth is, psychically speaking, very like another."

"I agree with our friend," Florin said, nodding to Silviu. "Science is no doubt correct, and to believe otherwise is worse than superstition — it is indefensible self-indulgence. Yet some in Calinesti — the village nearest to us — believe that nature herself, in her blind construction, is guided by spirits who take a hand from time to time in the affairs of men — and then we have brief upheavals of what appears to be the supernatural, the unnatural, the uncanny."

"You appear to be an educated man," Silviu said. "Surely you don't believe this peasant nonsense?"

Florin shrugged. "I believe situations come about as if there were a supernatural. You are familiar with Vaihinger's thesis?"

Silviu shrugged. "German philosophers can also be guilty of superstition under the guise of scientific discourse."

"Perhaps. But however it comes about, it is common knowledge that certain places have a shape, a contour, a positioning of elements that is not merely suggestive of evil, but is evil itself. Such a notion was put forward in slightly altered form by Mr. G.K. Chesterton, if I am not mistaken."

"As a literary conceit," Silviu said.

"But an interesting one. It is the idea that the shapes and arrangements of things can carry a meaning. Like an artist's grouping of elements in a landscape. Nature herself is arguably the greatest of artists. Who is to say that her creations don't sometimes have a purpose, an intention, a meaning greater than chance arrangement?"

"The notion has a certain charm," Silviu admitted. "But scientifically, it is complete nonsense."

Florin smiled and shook his head. "It is only a supposition, of course. But might we take it as correct, just for the sake of argument?"

"I suppose you can take anything as correct," Silviu said somewhat grumpily, but raised no further objection.

"Excellent. And would you object if we add the concept that, though physical beings, we live in the midst of an invisible spiritual world?"

"I object to the term 'spiritual,'" Silviu said.

"I only mean that all our influences are not apparent to our unaided senses. I cite the unease most people get just before an earthquake. This cannot be measured by science yet, or even truly ascertained. But it undoubtedly has a physical basis. In the sense I'm using the word, atoms are spiritual. We know of their existence only through rather sophisticated inference."

"Put that way, I suppose I can accept your supposition," Silviu said.

"My point is that things exist which, though impalpable, unsusceptible to the testimony of our senses, are nevertheless capable of exerting an influence over us."

"What you're stating is mere common sense," Silviu said.

"Yes. Thank you. So we have a world of influences which we do not know about directly. This I call spiritual. From this, we can conjecture that what happens in a man's life at any given time will depend to a great extent on the momentary and ever-changing nature of the spiritual world he passes through, an invisible world through which he swims like a fish in water."

Silviu pursed his lips and looked grave, but could find no objection to the statement.

Florin went on. "It is this world that gives our physical world its nature and tone. What happens here in our world of everyday reality is

influenced to a great extent by what is happening there in that world of unseen spiritual entities. An atom, I maintain, is one such entity. A ghost or an evil influence could be another."

Helene spoke up for the first time. "Is it so certain that anything is happening there? Mightn't this spiritual world, if it exists at all, be all of a piece, like an ocean or a fog bank?"

Florin smiled and shrugged. "It could be any way we please to imagine it. But in my view, the spiritual world is larger and more various than our world, and more mysterious. We have discovered atoms in it, or rather, inferred their existence, but there is no reason to think we have come to the end of what is there to discover."

Silviu nodded. He was uncomfortable with this line of reasoning, but he wasn't going to argue that all discoveries had been made.

"In my view," Florin said, "this spiritual realm is a complete world in its own right, a realm with a psychic climate that has its equivalents of storms and sunny days, and much else besides. If you'll grant me this, perhaps you'll also grant that this realm can produce freak weather conditions from time to time."

"A novel notion," Silviu said, "but it seems to follow from your premise."

"Therefore it follows that what we don't see, but is there nonetheless, influences us though we aren't aware of it. Now we come to the shapes of things and their influence on our lives."

"About time we got to the spooky stuff," Giulio said, pouring himself another plum brandy.

"A certain landscape, thrown up perhaps by chance elements, could provide a nexus, a focus, for certain spiritual beings — creatures that probably have an objective existence in their own realm, but are as ghosts or spirits in ours. The configuration of a countryside, the shape of a castle, and the momentary spiritual climate that forms up around them might have been instrumental in bringing forth a Vlad the Impaler, or, at another time, an Elizabeth Bathory."

"If that were the case," Silviu said, "why aren't we drowned in the horrors of the invisible world like the Dark Ages thought we were?"

"I think the Dark Ages exaggerated the situation. In my formulation, these eruptions of the so-called supernatural are both exceptional and

transitory. They are elements thrown up for a brief time by the chance combination of landscape and spiritual entity. They persevere for a few days or years, then dissolve again into the matter-of-factness of our daily lives. In one place the influences produce a Vlad the Impaler. A dozen miles away, in another spiritual microclimate, there might be nothing exceptional. A few miles further on, in yet another spiritual microclimate, we might find a spate of evil sprites in the form of bats, living only for a day, perhaps, but doing damage to whoever was so unfortunate as to encounter them."

"It's a lovely idea," Giulio said. I noticed he was a little drunk. "If we could figure this stuff out, we could run guided tours of haunted places. 'Come to Vlad's castle and meet Dracula! Appearing for three days only due to favorable weather conditions.' It could be a scheduled event, like our recent eclipse!"

"I don't think it's a funny idea at all," Gina said. "My grandmother was from Salerno and she had similar notions. I was always afraid of that old woman."

"Your mother must have inherited it from her," Giulio said. "I wonder what chance combination of landscape and evil spirits combined to bring *her* about."

"Don't you dare say anything against my mother!" Gina said, laughing and throwing a cushion at him.

The talk broke up at that point by mutual consent. Silviu had had enough of the argument. He seemed to feel that science had been turned into superstition, though he couldn't quite figure out how it had come about. But he was tired and perhaps not thinking too well. We all were tired. Our host, noticing the slackening of our interest, showed us to our rooms.

Helene and I went up to the little room that had been assigned to us, and while unpacking we fell into one of those quarrels that seem to arise for no reason, and to continue despite the best efforts of both parties to bring them to an end. At last we fell into an uneasy silence. Helene was sitting in front of the little dresser brushing her hair, looking back at me in the mirror, when she said, "You know, Charles, I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Do what?"

"Rub the side of your mouth in that way. You've only just begun it, and I'm sure it's meant to tease, but I find it quite sinister."

"I wasn't aware that I was doing anything."

She stared at me for a moment, then turned back to the mirror, continuing to brush her hair with long, even strokes.

MY MOOD, which had been equable all evening despite our situation, took a downward turn. I hung up my clothes and paced aimlessly around the room for a while. I was wondering what had possessed me to undertake this trip in the first place. What had seemed a light-hearted lark only a day ago now felt like the stupidest thing in the world, and a source of deep irritation. I wondered why I had ever agreed to travel with Giulio and Gina, newlyweds who couldn't stop touching each other, and Silviu, precise, didactic, humorless. Even Helene, normally the pleasantest of companions, tonight was acting irritable and unapproachable.

Now, just to make matters worse, she spoke up again. "Charles, I've asked you this before, please don't creep up on me like that."

I choked back a harsh reply, turned on my heel and walked through the little gallery down to the adjoining bathroom.

Despite it being almost midnight, I decided to shave, and thus steal a march on the next day. It was an old-fashioned bathroom, with a basin with two taps, a bathtub on clawed feet, and a shower attachment running from the faucet with a valve to direct the flow. The room itself was of plain pine, with a layer of white paint that covered it none too well. At the base of the tub, almost at the adjoining wall, the final wooden board had been cut too short, and there was a kind of gap in the wall, an opening less than a foot square. Reaching in and fumbling around, I found a space, too small to hold anything of much importance, but designed, so it seemed to me, to hold something. I found myself staring at it, and then I straightened and looked at my straight razor, which I had removed from its small leather case. I was turning the razor so that the light of the hanging kerosene lamp played across its edge, and all the time I was thinking to myself, "I know a trick worth two of that," though I had no idea where I had heard it or what I meant by it.

I looked out the small window. The darkness was almost complete,

but the dirty white mist floated on it in long streamers, as though it were reaching out and trying to grasp something. I watched for a while, then sighed and returned to my shaving.

When I was done, I put my razor back in its case and returned to our room. Helene had finished brushing her hair and was now removing her makeup with cold cream. She looked pale and not very attractive, her face elongated and twisted in the somewhat distorted mirror. I found myself looking at her and thinking, "A face like that could kill a man in his sleep and think nothing of it. But I know a trick worth two of that." It seemed to me the punch line of some story, but to save my life I couldn't remember where it came from. Perhaps it would come to me later.

I had a dream that night. In it, a horrid presentiment gripped me, and I ran down the hall to Giulio's and Gina's room. They were both dead. Someone had severed their heads. Or perhaps they had done it themselves. But how, in that case, had the heads changed position, his lying near her body and hers paired with his? In my dream I put the question to Giulio, and his head smiled at me and said, "Listen, it's not what you think."

"Perhaps not," I replied, "but in any event I know a trick worth two of that."

By mid-morning the next day we were on our way again. The sky had cleared and the rain had stopped. The sun was up and it promised to be another hot day. We came down to the main road without difficulty. When we reached the blockage that had stopped us last night, we found that a team of peasants were clearing the landslide, and a policeman was directing traffic around the remaining debris. We were on our way to Budapest, and Italy after that.

Our moods had lifted considerably. We didn't even talk about last night. Except for Silviu, who said, "That innkeeper, Florin, was a strange fellow with his far-fetched theories. But harmless, I think. Probably just trying to keep us amused."

I nodded, but I was thinking along quite different lines. Florin the innkeeper with his talk of Vaihinger and Chesterton and his theory of the ever-changing invisible world of spirits — what fools he must have taken us for! How he must have enjoyed the malice of his suggestions! I could see him now, chuckling in his warm sitting room, drinking plum brandy,

warming to its glow as he thought about how his vile insinuations would fester in us, releasing their poisons, spreading their insidious rot, like spores growing and festering in the dark places of our minds, until, months or years later, when we had forgotten their source, they would bear fruit and burst, and one day I would senselessly strangle Helene in her sleep, or, if the suggestion worked in her first, she would poison me during an apparently eventless evening over dinner, between the soup and the appetizer.

Helene was not going to get me, however. Back in our villa on the Lido, before the spiritual poison had a chance to make her dangerous, action could be taken that would make her death seem natural.

As for Silviu, Giulio and Gina, they would have to take their chances. I would make it a point never to see them again. Just to be on the safe side. But as for Florin, the innkeeper — the source of the contagion — I had my own plans for him.

Oh yes, my friend, I thought. Enjoy yourself in your snug sitting room, chucking over the catastrophes that will befall those who come your way. But soon I'll return — to retrieve my shaving case, and my straight razor, which I so carefully hid in the little space between the bath tub and the wall — and then I'll show you I know a trick worth two of that.



Last year we got our first taste of Mr. Ford's fiction with "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant." Jeffrey Ford's other work includes three novels about the Well-Built City, The Physiognomy, Memoranda, and most recently The Beyond. He is currently working on a new book, entitled The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque. Mr. Ford lives in the vicinity of the New Jersey setting for this baroque tale.

The Honeyed Knot

By Jeffrey Ford



ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO I had a student in a Composition course I was teaching, who, upon my giving the class a writing assignment, raised his hand and, with a monotone voice, asked, "Mr. Ford, what if we don't have any rhymes?" I looked up to see if he was kidding, but what I saw was a worn leather jacket, an ageless face, a sinister Dutch boy haircut and eyes that stared so intently they seemed to be seeing all the way around the world to the back of his own head.

"Don't worry," I said. "We're not writing poetry. Just tell a story."

"But I have no rhymes," he insisted.

He sat there for the entire class and did nothing but stare. I didn't understand his dilemma, but it was college, he was paying, and as long as he wasn't obstreperous, I figured I'd let him sit there and work through it.

After teaching for another ten years, though, his statement began to become clear to me. Hundreds of students and thousands of papers later, I too had begun to feel a conspicuous lack of rhymes. At first, I thought perhaps it was my age. Long gone were the days when the students would

mistake me for one of them. I felt out of touch at work, as if I had been hollowed out and was sleepwalking through my duties. It was eerie, otherworldly, and I had a vague presentiment that it had to do with the residual power of all those papers I'd read and the authors' minds behind them. Make no mistake, words have magic. They are contagious. In delving so deeply into other individuals' writing processes, I had come in contact with secret machinations. I had witnessed inexplicable instances of the uncanny.

I remember one woman, who wrote about the fact that she had a Santeria spell put on her by her husband's ex-wife. She was surprised on a particular Sunday morning to find dinner plates of dry rice and human hair positioned at the four corners of the outside of her house. Under the advisement of an aunt, who was also an adept of the mysteries of that religion, she suspended a bowl of water with an egg in it from the ceiling. Three days later, when she broke the egg, she found it contained a blood spot. This is how she discovered the type of curse it was. Before finally going to New York and hiring a Bruja to sacrifice a chicken for her, she met with all manner of accidents and mishaps, some of which I had seen the proof of — bruises from her fall down a flight of stairs, her dented car in the parking lot, the results of a fire that had started spontaneously in her pocket book.

Another young woman, a favorite student of mine, divulged in an essay that she was a witch, and, later in the semester, as a favor to me, cast a spell to cure some trouble I was having with my vision. The night she worked her magic, she came to class in a pure white outfit, like a child's party dress, and white patent leather shoes. She never said a word and left before the class was over. Three days later, my sight was better.

I remember a young African-American student who had traced his lineage, with green crayon on a piece of cardboard, back to Leif Eriksson, the Viking explorer on one side and on the other, Geronimo. He believed he was constantly being watched by the infrared eyes of satellites. Who was I to tell him he was mistaken? Perhaps even more pathetic was a girl who wrote that she had a disease that caused exotic flowers to grow in her lungs. When I asked her about it, she said, "Like a garden. When they blossom, I will suffocate to death."

Then there was the meek, bespectacled young man who spoke only

in whispers and ended up raping and murdering a child in his neighborhood during the time he was a student of mine. All of his stories and essays concerned a certain dragon named Flamer, and when I saw him on CNN, manacled and accompanied by two U.S. marshals, I blamed myself for having failed to decipher the obscure symbolism of his tales and ward off the tragedy. That little girl's death haunted me for years, but the most unnerving incident of my career had to do with a forty-seven-year-old woman with a metal plate in her head. Her story proved to be a prism that focused all the disparate narratives of all of my hundreds of students together into a lesson I will never forget.

Mrs. Apes came to my class in that fall semester so devoid of rhymes I had considered quitting. She was very soft spoken, and although her face was scarred and her hair somewhat spotty in front, she had a look of simple kindness about her that I immediately liked. The other students, all much younger, were, at first, put off by her questions and encouragements because she was unabashed in her expression of emotion and would touch them lightly on their shoulders when talking to them. By the third class, though, they were treating her like the mother they wished they had.

Her writings were neither stories nor essays. Visionary testaments is the best way I can think to describe them. I hadn't seen anything like them since the dragon stories of Kevin Wheast. They had no official beginning or ending, and their purpose was elusive. Birds turned into wolves and leaped into the sky to reside in a magical cloud realm where the tears they cried became a rain that washed terror out of lonely children. Deer knew the secrets of creation, crows lived inside men's minds, dogs harbored the souls of dead saints. This strange and complex cosmology was watched over by the loving spirit, Avramody.

I knew it was best to work with what I was given by the student at first and then try to move on to different things as the semester progressed. She was an atrocious speller, and her sentence structure was, at times, bizarre, as if she was translating from another language. Paragraphing was out of the question. When I would mention these problems to her and possible strategies for overcoming them, she would laugh softly and look into the distance as if remembering the amusing antics of a long dead relative.

Then one day, when I was having a conference with her at my desk at the front of the classroom, I asked her to write a story about some incident

that happened in her life. She was silent for some time before blurting out the fact that her husband had brutally beaten her and broken her skull. "The police had to shoot him," she said. "And when they took me to the emergency room, I came out of my body and flew around the hospital, seeing everything. I saw people's true colors, like a glowing ball of light, right here," she said, pointing to her solar plexus. "With each soul I encountered in this form, their color would shoot out a beam at my head. Finally, I met up with a little girl down in the hospital morgue in the basement who called me to her and kissed me between the eyes. She told me to return to my body and that I would live. Now I have the metal up there." Here, she knocked on her head as if it was a door.

"A metal plate?" I asked her.

She nodded. "My head is a magnet and a beacon. At times it is a bonus, because it allows me to see into situations, to broadcast to the world, but it also makes me forget important things I need to remember."

I knew the worst thing I could do was to dismiss Mrs. Apes's story. It was her reality, and if I wanted to help her with her writing, I had to respect it no matter how incredible it sounded. Still, I had my job to do, so I pressed her a little, hoping to find a focused topic she would be willing to write about.

"What's one of the things you have forgotten?" I asked. "For you to feel that there is something missing from your memory, you must have a vague idea what it entails."

"I had a daughter," she told me. "She was a beautiful girl, as sweet and kind as her father was a monster. Four years ago, two years after I was attacked, when she was fourteen, she was hit by a car while crossing the street in front of her school. She was rushed to the hospital and the doctors worked on her for hours, but she finally died from a traumatic head injury. I almost died from grief, myself. I've always felt I should have seen it coming, should have been there to help her," she said, but her placid smile never diminished.

I looked away from Mrs. Apes for a moment and saw the other students of the class had been listening intently. Their various facades of youthful cynicism and cool had melted, leaving their faces looking like those of a bunch of children, watching, for the first time, the squadron of hideous monkeys take wing in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Mrs. Apes continued. "Anyway, my daughter was taken to the same hospital I had been taken to." Here she leaned forward and put her hand on my arm. "Do you know that because of the same last name, the x-ray technician mixed up my head x-rays with hers? When the doctor noticed from the first name that the tech had pulled the wrong pictures, he asked for my daughter's. At one point, he had a copy of each on his desk. That is when he discovered that they were identical. The damage, the breaks, the fractures, were a perfect likeness of each other. I mean perfect."

I shook my head.

"Think about it," she said. "I was forty-one when it happened to me and my daughter was fourteen."

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But I believe my visions are leading me to the answer."

"What is it you've forgotten?" I asked.

"My daughter's name," she said. "I can't for the life of me remember her name. I call up my sister in California and ask her what my daughter's name was, and she tells me, but before I can write it down I forget it. If I'm not looking at it on a piece of paper, I can't remember. That loss of memory is agony to me."

"Could you write about that?" I asked.

Mrs. Apes turned very somber. "I'll try," she said, "but wait till you see what happens."

I took her vague warning under advisement, and wondered if I had done the right thing by trying to get her to write about something so close to her. I had learned through the years that students who dealt with very personal material could have real breakthroughs in their writing, because, very often, it was the confusion caused by the memories of these events that was getting in the way of their expressing themselves clearly. Stories and essays don't produce themselves, and they aren't born from typing fingers. The reality of a narrative exists first in the mind.

She went back to her computer and started working. I had to see to some of the questions and problems of other students, and for a while I paid no attention to her. As I was making my rounds of the classroom, checking in with everyone and reading pieces of the projects they were working on, I finally came to Mrs. Apes's work station. She was not typing

but simply staring blankly at the screen. I looked over her shoulder and saw that the monitor was flashing a jumble of letters and symbols that changed with each pulsation. The background color, which was normally a royal blue, was now pink.

"Wow," I said. "I've never seen that before."

When she laughed the screen went completely blank, and the computer made a sound like it was dying.

"I told you," she said. "It's the plate in my head. Now it's ruined your machine."

"No," I said. "It probably just hit a glitch. These machines are used by thousands of students every year. The wear and tear probably did it in. Maybe it contracted a virus along the way."

"If you say so," she said.

"Were you making any progress?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Well, before you forget what you had, let's switch you to another machine," I told her. I walked over to an empty work station and got the computer up and running for her.

By the end of the class, Mrs. Apes's metal plate had beamed three machines into uselessness. She was effusively apologetic but kept telling me that she had warned me. She was the last student to leave, and I stopped her and told her not to worry about the machines, that I'd get them fixed.

"Thank you, thank you," she said. "You know, I saw in my writing that you'd find a buck in the road."

"Gratuities are unnecessary," I said. "But let's hope it's a hundred." She smiled at me and left.

Later that afternoon, I had the computer tech take a look at the machines that had gone haywire. He turned them on and they worked perfectly.

"There's nothing wrong with them," he said.

I described what I had seen and ran by him Mrs. Apes's metal plate theory. He told me it was possible that the plate might have had something to do with it. "There's an electromagnetic field around these machines when they are on, and the body generates its own electromagnetic field. I've never heard of it happening before, though. More than

likely, she didn't want to write and just screwed them up herself when you weren't watching."

I hadn't considered the fact that she might be sabotaging the machines consciously in order not to have to deal with her memories of her daughter. It was an interesting possibility, and it made me decide that during the next class I would have her write about something less personal. If she was going to those lengths to avoid the subject, it might be dangerous to force her to it. I had to remind myself that it was a writing class and not a psych experiment.

That night I had a late class and some time to kill before it, so I went over to the library and asked the librarian to do a search for me on the name or word "Avramody." I told her I suspected that it might be from some crackpot religion or cult, maybe the title of one of the myriad mediaeval demons. She promised that she would work on it and let me know if she found anything. If I had the time, I would have gone through the microfilm of the local newspaper and seen if I could find a story in the Crime Beat section about Mrs. Apes's husband's attack on her and subsequent death at the hands of the police.

Instead, I phoned her counselor and asked what he knew about her claims of a metal plate in her head. He said she had never told him anything about it. "Look," he told me, "she seems like an ordinary middle-aged woman to me, but sometimes that ordinariness is the problem. It wouldn't be the first time one of our students has invented an interesting past for themselves. She was obviously abused by her husband, maybe she is looking for empowerment through a sense of individuality. She wants to be different and special. Maybe she is reinventing herself now that she is in school. Don't question it too deeply," he said.

My night class let out at 10:30. By the time I got to my car and began the hour-and-a-half ride home, it was almost 11:00. Instead of taking the NJ turnpike, which was too fast for me, I always took route 537, a country road that passed through farmland and woods. Just after the midnight news came on the radio, I found my buck.

Weighing about two hundred and fifty pounds and carrying a ten-point rack, it came charging out of a blind of cattails on the left side of the road. In an instant, I slammed on the brakes, but the car went into a skid, and I helplessly watched as the corner of my station wagon nailed the huge

animal in the side. Upon impact it bent in toward my windshield, and, for a moment, I could clearly see its eye, brimming with animal fear, looking in at me. Then it flew off my car from the force of the collision and I stopped. The radio went off when the car cut out and everything was dead quiet.

I couldn't open the driver side door because the whole left front of the car was smashed back and out of alignment. Instead, I crawled across the seat and let myself out the passenger side. The buck was there, writhing on the side of the road, kicking only one of its back legs spasmodically. I was shaking and my mind was blank. The animal craned its neck up out of the pool of blood it lay in and looked back over its shoulder at me. That was when I noticed that one of its lower antler points had grown down and into the side of its jaw. The sight of that anomaly made me wince.

A great rasping sound came up from its chest and turned into high-pitched squeals. It was clear to me that the creature was about to die. "I'm sorry," I said aloud to it. Its cries became weaker and more breathy, and just before it went limp, it made a noise through its mouth that sounded distinctly like a human voice uttering a word. I swear I heard it, a word made up of only vowels. I shook my head and backed away. As soon as I crawled into the car, I got it started, and drove slowly to The Vincent Town Diner, where I called the police to tell them what had happened. The officer told me he'd send someone out to fetch it.

For the rest of the drive home, I was jittery, waiting for something else to come dashing across the road. I prayed the car, which was in very bad shape, wouldn't crap out and leave me stranded in the dark. When I finally pulled into my driveway, I felt like crying. The first thing I did upon entering the house was go upstairs and check on my sons, who were fast asleep. Their light, steady breathing diminished the trembling of my hands and put me at ease. My wife was also asleep, and I got undressed and into bed beside her.

"I hit a deer on the way home," I told her.

"Why?" she asked from sleep.

I didn't bother to wake her. Once I told her about the accident she would be unable to sleep for the rest of the night. I just lay there in the dark, trying to get warm by thinking about a vacation we had taken to the beach the previous summer. My method of relaxation worked quite well, and I

was eventually able to doze off. Somewhere in my sleep, I relived the accident, saw the wounded deer, and heard that haunting word composed of vowels. In my dream I told myself, "You've got to remember this word for when you wake up." And then the morning had come and I was awake.

The accident had left me with a feeling of unreality, as if I had died in it and was now a spirit who was unaware that he was no longer alive. My wife, who was a nurse, told me to take the following day off, and I decided to take the rest of the week. It was not only that I was afraid of driving again, but more that I didn't want to leave home. I wanted to stay close to my sons for some reason. They were eight and ten, at ages where a hug had to be requested from them, but when I told them what had happened with the deer, they kept hugging me and touching my face.

When my wife left for work and the kids had gone to school, I called the college and explained that my car was wrecked, and I had been slightly hurt, although the truth was there was nothing physically wrong with me. Then I called the garage in town to come and tow the car in for repairs. While I was waiting for the tow truck to come, I decided to make a pot of coffee. At the sink in the kitchen, running water into the pot, I looked out the window into the backyard. There, in broad daylight, I saw a deer drinking out of the bird bath. The sight of it sent a wave of fear through me. I walked to the back door, pulled it open and yelled, "What do you want?" There was nothing there.

I drank my coffee and reasoned that the deer was just a coincidence and that we did live in a wooded area very close to the Pine Barrens. Still, a deer sighting in daylight was not a common occurrence. I played music, tried to mark a stack of papers, watched television, but the entire time I kept trying to remember that word the buck had spoken to me.

That afternoon, when my older son, who rode his bike to school, did not return on time, I felt an ominous reptile uncoiling in my thoughts and I became frantic. I took the younger one, who had been delivered by the bus, and, since I didn't have a car, set out on foot to look for his brother. All manner of horrors went through my head, and don't think I didn't remember what had happened to Mrs. Apes's daughter. I walked so fast, my son who was with me had to run to catch up.

After walking the length of five long blocks at a breakneck pace, we

saw him at a distance coming along on his bike. I was so relieved I laughed out loud. When he reached us he told me that he had stopped with some other kids to see a deer that had come out of the woods by the lake. I told him I had seen the same one in our backyard that morning.

"The one with the weird horn?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"It had a weird horn that grew down instead of up."

I told him the one I had seen didn't have antlers.

"Two deer in one day," he said, "good thing your car's in the shop," and then took off on his bike. "I'll race you guys home," he called back over his shoulder.

I was in a perpetual fog for the next few days, only surfacing when the kids said they were going to do something. Then my mind focused into worry. During these days I must have filled the backs of twenty envelopes with combinations of vowels, trying to reproduce the word that eluded me. Finally, Monday came, and I went to pick my car up at the shop in order to go to work. It was a white knuckle drive that morning even though the sun was bright and the day was beautiful.

When I got to work, I found in my mailbox an interoffice envelope from the Library. Inside was a typed sheet with a yellow Post-it note from the librarian. The note said:

Jeff,

Next time, how about something a little easier, like who invented Velcro? Anyway, here's what I found on Avramody. Hope it's what you were looking for.

Jean

I took the sheet back to my office, closed the door, and read it.

Nicholas Avramody, born 1403, died 1441, lived in the village of Fornapp on the southern coast of England. He had been born into a well-to-do family and was given a classical education by his father who was a cartographer. Around the age of twenty, Avramody left home and gave up his part in his father's business. He built himself a small home in the nearby woods and began writing a book that was later published, entitled *The Honeyed Knot*. This work would eventually become a key text for the

Puritans, and would figure extensively in the religio-philosophical works of Cotton Mather. The honeyed knot was a metaphor for the impossibly complex plot of human existence. For mere mortals, their lives and the reasons for the events in them may seem like a tangled ball of string, but this inexplicable mess is a sweet one because it is the deity's plan for us. Within the knot, all our lives touch and crisscross and bind together for good but unknowable reasons.

This philosopher hermit eventually fell afoul of the church for another belief of his, namely the fact that animals have souls and given enough patience, one can communicate with them. Creatures all have knowledge of the plan, a knowledge we lost in the garden of Eden. When the locals started going to him for spiritual guidance, the clergy became jealous and started rumors that he practiced bestiality with the various animals of the forest that flocked around his small home. It so happened at this time that a girl in Fomapp was bitten by a bat, contracted rabies and died. The church fathers told the townspeople that the bat had been sent by Avramody. They incited such fear and contempt of him that he was eventually attacked by an angry mob and cudgelled to death.

With this knowledge still buzzing in my head, I then went downstairs to my class only to be met by Mrs. Apes. She handed me a paper, and said, "I did it. I finished the piece you asked for." As soon as I was able to get all of the students working on their various projects, I sat down with her at my desk and looked at her writing. The piece had been executed very sloppily in pencil and was about four pages long. I got no further than the title, though, because there was the word the buck had spoken to me. I realized now that it did have one consonant, but a soft one that sounds like another vowel when surrounded by vowels.

"Ayuwea?" I said to Mrs. Apes.

She smiled, "My daughter's name."

"It's unusual," I said.

"My mother's mother was half Ojibwa Indian, and I had heard her name from my mother many times, but never saw it spelled. So when I had my daughter, I named her after my grandmother but had to invent the spelling. I knew she would be a special child and needed a special name."

"Does it mean anything?" I asked.

She shook her head and shrugged. "Something, I'm sure," she said.

"I thought you couldn't remember it," I said.

"Well, it was the strangest thing. Last week, after I had tried to write about her in class, I couldn't get her off my mind. Later that night, I was sitting in front of my television, and the name just popped into my head. I remembered it just like I had never forgotten it. I'm sure trying to write about her brought the name to me."

So I read Mrs. Apes's paper about her daughter. It was a loving tribute but nothing I hadn't seen from a thousand other students who had lost someone close to them and recorded their feelings and memories in writing. As I had suspected she would, Mrs. Apes had made great strides in her grammar and spelling in that paper, but I never got the chance to continue working with her because she never returned to class after that day. The school had no phone number for her and none of the other students knew her or where she lived.

This is where I thought the story should end. In one way it seemed satisfying that my student had come to some greater understanding of herself. There were loose ends, though, and all of the amazing connections didn't seem to add up to much. I decided to pass it off as one huge coincidence that I had somehow helped to generate through a bout of paranoia. With each class that came and went, I held out hope that she would return and I could continue to work with her.

Three weeks after Mrs. Apes's disappearance, at lunch one day, I saw a familiar face in the college pizza shop. She was wearing all black but looking exactly the same as when I had last seen her. I took my lunch over to her table and sat down.

"Do you think you could put a spell on this pizza and make it good?" I asked.

She looked up at me and shook her head. "It's dangerous to mock powers that are greater than you," said the witch and smiled.

She filled me in on what she had been doing since going on to study at the state university. I was always happy to hear when my students hadn't opted for a degree in business. She was studying anthropology at the graduate level now. That day she had come to the college, which was near her house, to do some research on her thesis, concerning the importance of written language in magic and witchcraft.

"How are your eyes?" she asked.

"I haven't had a problem since," I told her. "It's not my eyes I'm having a problem with now, it's my head."

"Such as?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "you'll love this." I proceeded to tell her the entire story of Mrs. Apes in all of its convoluted detail. When I got to the part about the buck I had hit and the word I believed I had heard it speak, she laughed. When I was done, I asked her, "What do you think of that?"

She looked into my eyes and her expression became serious. "You've missed something," she said.

"Like the boat?" I asked.

"It's important," she said.

"I think I was shaken by the incredible synchronicity of the whole thing," I told her.

"Listen," she said, "I'll make you a deal. If you'll read my thesis over before I submit it, I'll look into things for you."

"I'll read your paper anyway," I said, unsure if I wanted any more involvement in the supernatural.

I had to run to class after that, but before I left, she told me she would be in touch. Weeks passed and although I had learned to keep my uneasiness at bay, it was always there hovering in the background. At the end of the semester, I had a hard time giving Mrs. Apes an F for the course. I was required to because she had phantomed halfway through the semester. She had definitely learned something, though what it was exactly I wasn't sure.

On the last day, I still had quite a few papers to read before I could make out my grade sheets. I envied all those who had fled in a mass exodus after the final class had let out. The place was as still as a ghost town while I sat in my office reading. Just when I finished and was about to enter the final grades, the phone rang. It was Jean from the library.

"I think we're the only ones left on campus," I said.

"Count me out," she said. "I'm home, but I just remembered something I had meant to tell you."

"Okay," I said.

"I thought I was done with Avramody," she said, "but I found something else."

"What's that?" I asked.

"There was a student at the library yesterday, a young woman. She said she was doing research on a paper about vanity for one of your classes. She was rather outlandishly dressed in all white. Said her name was Maggie Hamilton."

I laughed. "I know who you mean," I said, "but her name isn't Margaret Hamilton."

"Well, she had me pull some microfilm for her from the local newspaper. She took it over to the machine, cued up the reel, and started going through it. When I walked back over there a little later to see if she needed help, she was gone. I left the reel on the machine for a while in case she came back but she didn't. Before I took the reel off, out of curiosity, I glanced at the page she was on and the name Avramody jumped out at me."

"More about the honeyed knot?" I asked.

"Not exactly," she said. "Do you remember about six years ago there was a student who went to the college here who raped and murdered a little girl?"

I said nothing.

"Hello?" said Jean.

"I'm here," I finally said.

"The little girl's name was Melissa Avramody. I don't know what you can do with that," she said.

"Thanks," I said. "I remember now."

After I hung up, I got out of my chair and paced back and forth in the confines of the office. This pointless journey finally ended at the window which overlooked the empty parking lot. I leaned my forehead against it and looked out. The sun had nearly set and twilight was creeping out of the trees of the nature preserve that bounded the asphalt expanse. I saw my car sitting there like a lonely student who has stayed in class long after dismissal. A few seconds later, my attention was drawn to something moving in the shadows by the edge of the woods. It stamped its hooves and, startled by the approach of night, turned to show me its rack of bone, one branch growing down into its jaw. At the sight of it, a feeling welled up from deep within me, and my own jaw opened to release a word made only of consonants.

When you are a teacher, you are ever vigilant to instruct, to correct, to lecture, to advise, to care. The residue of this responsibility accumulates around you through time and can serve to make you a poor student. That night in my office, in the last hours of the semester, I passed them all, Kevin Wheast, Melissa Avramody, Mrs. Apes, by setting myself an assignment to stand for those I never received. I did not ask how long it had to be or if I could have an extension but turned on my computer and began typing. Somewhere in all those words, I found the rhymes. Then the final loop of the honeyed knot tightened and drew me back into its jumbled heart. ¶

SPECULATIONS

OUR CLONES WILL INGEST ALL OF THE YUMMY FOODS AND INTOXICANTS WE CRAVE. WE WILL DOWNLOAD THEIR SENSATIONS VIA NEURAL NETWORKS...



LEAVING EVERYTHING DANGEROUS OR FATTENING IN THE CLONES.



A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

PASCAL'S TERRIBLE SILENCE

The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me.

— Blaise Pascal, 1623-1662

W E moderns have had to confront new varieties of physical infinity, and Pascal's reaction to the scale of creation science was only beginning to unveil still rings true to us.

But Pascal did not cower merely before largeness; he feared its hush.

Perhaps humanity can't stand emptiness, the flip side of infinity. For Pascal feared the meaninglessness of it all, the absence of any hint that human effort had pith and substance. Nearly all sf attempts to answer this supreme agoraphobia by populating the yawning abyss.

The longing for alien contact seems to fulfill a parallel need. Yet this is a curious reassurance, since on the face of it such a discovery

will deprive us of what many still believe to be a true uniqueness. So I think the clue behind the longings of UFO fans and *Star Trek* episodes and endless sf texts is that aliens give us companionship, making the infinities comfy, even talkative.

A truly strange and unknowable alien undercuts this comfortable feeling, and thus is quite rare in sf. Similarly, the use of time in sf often veers away from truly labyrinthian implications. The infinities of causal loops in Robert Heinlein's classic "By His Bootstraps — " and onward are often seen as horrifying. A standard cliché of such loop stories is that the narrator ends trapped in one, feeling himself tiring, filling with angst and ennui.

But this betrays and denies the nature of a truly fixed causal loop, for the victim caught in one cannot experience loss of energy or accu-

mulation of knowledge — everything really will be the same each cycle. The infinity of time becomes a cage that implicitly denies the premise — but even that seems preferable to the abyss of meaningless repetition.

So what interests me most is sf which does not subvert the infinite. I prefer Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*, which many find hard to read. Their difficulty probably stems from the novel's resolute refusal to ground its vision in concrete detail, to give the feeling of a mapped territory. Instead, immensity is seen abstractly, its ponderous forces unrolling through measureless time.

By contrast, Arthur Clarke's novel *2001* made its approach to the infinite clearly symbolic. Taking another tack, the film *2001* grounded the implied infinity in hard surfaces, such as the eighteenth-century bedroom wherein human mortality plays itself out.

Like the alien, the infinite is a subject best crept up on. Much must be implied; the reader must be caught by sudden visions. I attempted something like this in a novel, *Against Infinity*, only to find much later that an entire symbolic undercurrent seemed to be working to other purposes. The enormous is sometimes a legitimate

metaphor for the infinite, but the core of the mystery lies in the difference. Our minds were not built for the truly infinite.

An enormous hush, however, calls forth other demons.

A cliché of post-George Lucas space films is that the fighter-pilot zooms and roars in high vacuum. Just about everybody knows this is phony, yet we do not think of all creation as a place without a voice, a vault of no sound. The gleaming galaxy is silent. Stars smashing to supernovas, black holes sucking down whole solar systems in a day — all without a tremor.

Sound is by definition the wave motion of molecules, whether in gas or solid or liquid. No matter — or at least, very little — means no sound.

Between the stars there is about one hydrogen atom in the volume of a sugar cube. That is too little to support a sound wave, because a molecule must smack into another to convey the information that the wave is there.

To be a wave at all implies some reciprocity, a give and take. Under the slight pressure of the wave, gas atoms must move forward, overshoot their place, then return to where they were. Only

the wave moves, just as on the surface of the ocean; the sea stays where it was.

That lone hydrogen atom cannot find another hydrogen to thump for a very long time — long after the ostensible wave would have passed. Hence, if something (say, a passing asteroid) shoves on a hydrogen atom, it just takes off, saying nothing to other hydrogens nearby. The asteroid sheds these atoms, like gravel spitting away from the tires of a car; no sinuous motion, no reciprocity between the press of a wave and the inertia of matter.

Between the Earth and the nearest star there lies a vacuum better than any we can produce in the laboratory. Take that sugar cube of volume and push it out, all the way to the nearest star, sweeping up all the hydrogen in the way. That is a fantastic distance, 4.2 light years — that unit itself an everyday synonym for the infinite.

A way to think of it is to imagine the sun as a tennis ball in Times Square, New York. Then the Earth would be a dust mote floating across the street. Alpha Centauri, our nearest neighbor, would be another yellow tennis ball rolling around near Chicago.

Along all that huge distance, the hydrogen swept up by a speed-

ing sugar cube would add up to about a millionth of an ounce, an undetectable weight. So filmy is this gas that it does not function as a gas at all, just a collection of independent atoms.

Of course there is much more flitting between the stars, all kinds of electromagnetic noise as electrons fidget from one atomic energy level to the next. If these revels happen to resonate in the region of wavelengths our eyes have evolved to see, we get to witness the stars' own unleashed furies. Sympathetic electrons in our own retinas dance in response, excited by incoming waves.

For those frequencies we cannot see, our antennas can now pick up the excited buzz of gas turning into stars, or the reverse. In the last century we have thrown open the windows on more and more of this electromagnetic blare, a cacophony descending from all the universe. The cosmic bedlam goes right back to the primordial, faded hiss of hydrogen itself being born right after the Big Bang.

Fred Hoyle offered that name as ridicule, since he preferred his own model of Creation, with matter coming into being at a constant clip, the Steady State Universe. It was a pretty picture, that Creation

had no beginning and no end, just a universe swelling from a pinpoint that had already enjoyed an infinite life. Pretty, appealing — which was why so many were drawn to it — and wrong. (A famous motto holds that "Science is the brutal murder of beautiful theories by ugly facts.")

The Big Bang had the last word. But it was wordless, in fact — and soundless, too. Instead of envisioning an explosion, like a hand grenade going off in a phone booth, it is best to think of the Big Bang as all of space and time beginning at a point, and then emerging, cooling, expanding into the space it was making for itself. Call it the Enormous Emergence, though of course in the first unimaginable fraction of a second it was not enormous at all, and took up no more space than your fist.

And it didn't bang, either. There was no source for this Emergence, no one place it started and expanded into another place. It just happened. So, without matter running into other matter to create a coherent wave, there was no sound.

Pascal feared the moral silence of those spaces. He might have preferred that they be angry, the abode of a Satan perhaps, to what science was telling him: that far worse than being malign, the stars were indifferent. We can take on any oppo-

nent, but don't ignore us. Show some respect.

Yet in a way that heavenly silence should remind us to respect the fact that our natural world is alive with sound. How come?

When Apollo Eight looped around the moon, giving us our first look at our world, to my mind it justified every penny spent in space. They showed us ourselves whole and entire for the first time, revealed that we lived inside a membrane.

Looking at Earth, you seldom see earth — that is, dirt. You witness instead the skin of air and cloud and sea the planet has learned to wrap about itself. Our planet is a machine that edits its sun, a craft it evolved.

Life began here under a killing sleet of ultraviolet that hammered down from the unedited star just born, its hard glare unblocked by murky layers of methane and carbon dioxide.

Only water vapor intercepted some of the piercing radiation. Its efforts were self-limited, for the fierce energies of ultraviolet split water into hydrogen and oxygen, and the oxygen in turn absorbs exactly those wavelengths of ultraviolet that shatter water.

Only living creatures could do better, by inventing photosynthesis. The first forms to do this had to hide from the biting ultraviolet beneath about ten meters of water. Lakes or ponds seem best for this, since oceans seldom let floating algae stay at a constant depth.

Once these plants started editing the air, the air edited sunlight. Oxygen got fried into ozone at the top of the atmosphere, shielding the evolving forms below. Once oxygen reached about one percent of the air, the non-oxygen breathers started to feel its poisoning sting.

All this took a while. About two billion years passed before oxygen began making itself felt. The oxygen that did come into play was often scooped up by the carbon in the soil, and buried away. The carbon kept being recycled, leaving oxygen below ground, by processes of plate tectonics.

On a world more like Mars than Earth, with tectonics that began and then quickly froze out as the planet cooled, oxygen might have accumulated in the atmosphere much earlier, perhaps in only one hundred million years. Life could get a quicker start on such a world — a possibility still open in our theories of the early eras of Mars.

Once there was about one per-

cent oxygen to shield it, only about six hundred million years ago, life could begin to venture to the top of lakes, ponds, and oceans. Skeletons became common, leaving us plenty of fossils to mark the change.

Oxygen levels still climbed, born of life, until at around ten percent of the atmosphere's mass, its umbrella against ultraviolet allowed forms to climb out onto land. This happened about four hundred million years ago.

Oxygen was the crucial gas, because its atomic bonds stopped the ultraviolet that hammers hard on proteins and the like. Plus, it let the milder sun rays through to feed photosynthesis.

Since this is a universal property of oxygen, it bodes well for planets that can begin with the same sort of unpromising atmosphere we once had. But the crust of the world must cooperate, capturing some but not all the gases that together make an evolving atmosphere.

We still witness the ebb and sway of carbon dioxide in and out of our atmosphere, a tiny but crucial part. Though only a fraction of a percent of the air, it feeds all plant life and regulates the temperature of the surface through the now-famous greenhouse effect. In the long run, a rise in carbon dioxide

may warm the Earth enough to stimulate plant growth, which then puts a brake on carbon in the air.

The reverse seems to work, too, with a lower temperature killing plants, so that they cannot pull much carbon from the air. Volcanoes could then replenish it, in time.

All this is like breathing, as the late Lewis Thomas remarked, but on an immense time scale. The cycles of ice ages take at least tens of thousands of years, the "respiration" of the biosphere's largest membrane. Carbon in, carbon out....

That this intricate mechanism evolved on its own, though prodded by the slow increase in the sun's luminosity and the continental churn driven by the spinning Earth, is a striking example of coherent organization springing from unthinking processes — spontaneous order on the largest planetary scale.

With it, the Earth resembles an enormous cell, its life mediated by a permeable membrane that edits energy and light. It even selects from among the hailstorm of meteorites that bombard us daily, letting pass without fiery death only those larger than Volkswagens.

More subtly, it edits out our own voices. Just as we cannot hear

the cataclysms of distant suns, no hint of our own hubbub can escape Earth's airy membrane. The silence above that Pascal feared edits out all our brave talk, all the booming of our significance. The membrane refracts and reflects all our noises back from the top of the air, so that they return to us, dispersed and inaudible, each of our voices spread over whole territories by the time it bounces back from the high reaches.

So there is no way to speak to the stars except through electromagnetic waves. Yet life — here, at least — is engineered for acoustic waves. No creature uses more than a tiny sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum, mostly the visible and the near infrared, where our mammalian bodies radiate. (I've written about aliens who see in the radio wavelengths, for reasons of their local environment, in a novel, *Across the Sea of Suns* — but I don't think they're likely. I was intrigued by the idea that they might be our co-correspondents in interstellar communication, but we would not guess their nature for a long time, because we thought they had our advanced technology.)

So the membrane has edited us as well, tailoring our extraordinary hearing until in closed conditions we can hear over seven orders

of magnitude of sound amplitude.

So Pascal's silence was ordained by evolution. Life sharpened its perception of the waves in its membrane, largely ignoring the electromagnetic discourse of the stars.

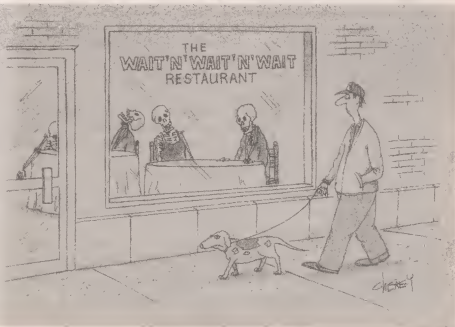
Jean Cocteau, in the first volume of his diaries, remarked that Andre Gide "has never experienced the discomfort of infinity." To the reserved French mind of that time perhaps infinity was simply too messy, too unconstrained, to be admitted into experience. European literary society had a habit of wrapping the universe around itself, shutting out the immensities. Jules

Verne was the first great French writer of sf, and the last.

So in the end, our ceaseless grappling with infinity demands art of a peculiarly intellectual kind. The essence of enormity must be attacked indirectly, by leaving in the narrative a feeling for the non-centrality of humans themselves, for the prospect that unlimited space and time promises more, finally, than our ultimately futile attempts at closure and domestication.

We talk often, I suspect, to drown out the silence of the spheres.

Comments welcome at gbenford@uci.edu. ☞



Mr. Disch scarcely needs introducing to most of our readers—those of you who don't recall such contributions to our pages as *On Wings of Song* or "The Brave Little Toaster" will likely know other classics of his, such as *Camp Concentration*, 334, and *The M.D.* His most recent books include *The Priest and his nonfiction consideration of the science fiction genre*, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*. He lives in upstate New York these days and promises to write more short fiction in the days ahead.

Jour de Fête

By Thomas M. Disch

"Accumulated violence...brought on confrontations at every fête during this age...as in the *cournée* in Langres in 1386.... This was a game that took place on all feast days, in which people threw stones at one another."

—Robert Muchembled, on the revelries of medieval France

THE SKY THAT MORNING was as clear as Adam's soul while still he had his home in Paradise. From the city walls you could see as far as Mont

Blanc leagues to the south; to the north the Marne formed a silvery scythe that rested against a horizon blue as the Virgin's mantle. One could not have wanted better weather for the day of the *cournée*, nor a worthier wine with which to salute the occasion.

The massive bowl of the *cournée*, with its crude handles, was passed from player to player, and each swore a favorite oath, or called on St. Mammes to favor his team, as he lifted it to his lips and tried to drink from it without bathing in the wine. As easily sip from a barrel.

When each player had been baptized in this way, the pipers struck up their tune, and the two teams rappelled down the inner walls of the city ramparts on either side of the Porte des Moulins. That gate was noted for the many times it had been destroyed and then rebuilt, first by Julius Caesar, then by the Vandals, who burned down the whole town, and by Attila, who burned it down again. Barbarossa had breached the walls but, at the intercession of the bishop, had spared Langres itself, a mercy commemorated by a statue of the Emperor. That statue was subsequently melted down for shot, but its pedestal remained in the square before the Cathedral of St. Mammes, and it was from that pedestal that the first stones of the *cournée* proper were to be flung when the fête began.

First, however, that initial advantage had to be gained. Taking possession of the pedestal was always the bloodiest part of the game, for though all weapons forged from metal were proscribed, as well as any hafted weapon, a stone shaped well for both striking and for gripping can do harm enough — as Cain himself will testify.

As each man alighted at the foot of the ramparts he ran to where he had deposited his chosen stone — either hidden in plain sight among the cobbles of the square or secreted in some doorway or on a window ledge, peeking out from behind a pot of herbs. And here is one, a piece of limestone with a wicked edge, that someone has thought to hide beneath his own coiled excrement, and here's the clever fellow who devised that stratagem, the hero of this brief epic, our rustic Ulysses and Ajax of the Marne, Alexandre Meunier, a journeyman cooper fighting this year for the first time with the men of his guild and those affiliated — vintners, brewers, innkeepers. Not a fellow you would have thought destined for victory from the vantage high above the fray shared by most Langresiens, for he did not advertise himself a warrior by stature or bearing. A boyish figure, a beardless face, a mere David facing a whole phalanx of Goliaths; for the opposing Red were all in the stone-cutting and -milling trades for which Langres has always been noted.

In such broad and callused hands as theirs Alexandre's chunk of limestone would have seemed as little threatening as a child's toy. But in Alexandre's hand it proved effective enough as he zigzagged amongst the Reds, running as point toward the pedestal with his four mates just behind him. As they drew near, the Reds' stones rained down on them like hail,

and one of the four was taken from the game by a well-placed two-pounder just above his right ear. The crowd cheered at the sight of first blood, Red and Green indiscriminately, but when, in despite of their loss, Alexandre scrambled to the top of the pedestal on the shoulders of his friends, it was only the Greens who cheered.

All the stones that had fallen like hail were now scooped up and placed at Alexandre's feet, a tribute he spent as fast as it was offered him. In all the annals of the Langres *cournée* there had never been such an arm as Alexandre's, such deadly aim, such carnage among the Reds. Years — decades! — of old debts were settled by the lad's missiles. The quarryman Gilles Choquet lost his left eye, his nephew Jean half of his young teeth. Three members of the Gardinier clan were carried from the square unconscious. Skulls were cracked along with ribcages.

Once the pedestal was mounted it was forbidden, by the rules of the game, to bring new stones into play. The two teams were ranged on either side of the pedestal, the Reds facing Alexandre, who deftly sidestepped any stone thrown at him: the Greens behind him, ready to retrieve those stones that had not hit their mark and relay them back to Alexandre, many marked now by the enemy's blood.

The game would continue until there were no more stones in play — but since this had never been known to happen (there would always be someone hoarding up for some final, all-redeeming Parthian shot), the two teams had to stand their ground until sunset, when the contest would be halted and both teams would process to the cathedral to receive the sacrament.

Like so many other initial triumphs the *cournée* slowly deflated in the course of the long hot summer afternoon, as the Reds sullenly withheld their ammunition and the Greens were reduced to taunts and jeers, to which the townspeople on the ramparts added their own. For they had come to witness blood, and didn't care whose, so long as it was red and flowed freely.

The impasse was brought to an end, at last, by one of these impatient onlookers, who aimed a small stone at Alexandre just as he'd scored a major hit against the Reds. A cheer had gone up; Alexandre lifted his arms in the universal gesture of victory, and the stone struck his forehead almost unnoticed by the mob. Alexandre shook his head, as though to shoo off a fly — and then he simply toppled to the ground.

It has often been remarked that those who live by the sword shall perish by it; that those who rise most high have the farthest to fall, and here was one more proof of such maxims. That very evening, at the service following the game, the bishop of Langres pointed the moral of Alexandre's story to his flock, but, for all his scolding and wisdom he was not such a fool as to declare an end to the revels of Langres. They were an ancient and beloved institution, as integral to the city's identity as the very stones of the Porte des Moulins. How should the people of Langres, especially its youths, celebrate on a major feast day without the excitement of a *cournée*? As well celebrate Christmas without seeing the Infant Jesus asleep in his manger among the adoring animals and shepherds and the Three Magi. There is a ceremonial side to life that is just as important as the manufacture of barrel staves and millstones.

As for young Alexandre, his death, like that of his great namesake, undoubtedly represents a tragic loss, but we may take comfort in knowing that he will always be remembered by the people of Langres and by all who honor the ancient sport of the *cournée* as one of its greatest players and a model citizen ready to lay down his life in the service of his community. The stones he hurled still pave our streets; the blood he spilled is wine upon our tables.



Rod Garcia introduced us to the fantastic medieval world of Markovy last August in "The Iron Wood." Our patience in waiting for a new glimpse of the world has been rewarded with this wonderful new adventure.

Firebird

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Witch-girl

DEEP IN THE WOODS, gathering fungus for the Bone Witch's supper, Katya heard the firebird call her name. "Katea-

katea-katea...." Brushing tangled black hair from sea-green eyes, she searched for the bird, seeing only tall pine trunks and blue bars of sky. Her bright homespun dress had the red-orange firebird embroidered on the bodice, done in silk from Black Cathay, and the Barbary cloth called Crimson. She had stitched it herself on sunless winter days. Katya called out, "Here I am. Come tell what you see."

She listened. Insects hummed in hot pine-scented air. Farther off she heard a woodpecker knocking. She called again, "Come to me. Come to me. Come tell what you see."

Now that she was fully grown, Katya never feared the woods by daylight. Leopards, troll-bears, lycanthropes, and forest sprites lurked between the trees, waiting to make a meal of the unwary. But by day the

woods had a hundred eyes alert for any suspicious movement. No lynx or leopard could stir a foot without birds calling and squirrels chattering. All Katya need do was listen. Night was another matter. But the Bone Witch did not let her out at night. Nor would the Witch let her leave the hut without her slave collar and protective rune. Each morning she made Katya repeat her invisibility spell. She was valuable property, the Witch told her. "I have not raised you to feed some hungry troll-bear — not when you are finally becoming useful."

Katya saw things differently. She began life as a girl-child thrown away in time of war and famine. Survival taught her to make the best of today, for tomorrow was bound to be worse. It taught her to lie instinctively, and never to shit where she meant to sleep. And to trust in her luck, which had kept her from the fate of hundreds like her. Death had had ample chance to take her, making Katya think she was being saved for something special. Like to be a princess.

At nine she was given to the Witch for two handfuls of salt and a cattle pox cure. The family feeding her figured they were doing everyone a favor. "The Witch can better provide for you. We are poor," the father informed her — as if she had somehow not noticed, sleeping on straw between the hearth and the hogs — "while you are stubborn and willful." His wife agreed. "Getting you to obey is like trying to teach a cat to fetch." Had Katya been a boy, it would have been different. But she was a girl, naturally wanton, unruly, frivolous and amoral, a growing threat to their son's virtue. They were duty-bound to keep her chaste and ignorant, then give her to some man in marriage — a dead loss to the family. Better by far to give her to the Bone Witch.

Only their lazy son objected. Not the least threatened, he wanted her around. Without her, who would do his chores? Who would he spy on in the bath? He had promised to rape her when they got bigger.

Katya herself had said nothing. Even at nine, she had a stubborn sense of self-worth that regularly got her whipped. People called her changeling and worse, with her pert ways and wicked green eyes — a girl switched at birth for a defiant demon-child. Bundling up her straw doll and wooden spoon, she took a seat in the father's cart. They lurched off, crossing the Dys at Byeli Zamak, headed for the Iron Wood. All she could think was that she was to become a witch-girl. And witches were burned.

But that was years ago. And she had not been burnt — not yet at least. By now she had spent half her life in the woods. She knew which mushrooms were food, and which sent you on flights of fancy. Which berries were sweet and which were deadly nightshade, which herbs cured and which herbs killed. Having nothing of her own, she happily appropriated all of nature, making these her woods. Every screech and cry in the trees spoke to her. When it was safe, she spoke back.

"Katea-katea-katea...." The call came closer. Like her, the firebird was a curious soul, and could be coaxed with low soft calls. He hated to think of anything happening in his woods without him telling the world about it.

Picking up her bark basket, she headed for the sound, fording a shallow stream to enter a fern-choked glade ringed by stands of slim silver birch. Birches loved the light and fought to fill any sort of clearing. At the far end of the glade she skirted a pond frequented by red deer and herons. On the bare bank she saw pug marks.

Kneeling amid the bracken, she felt the tracks with her fingers. The ground was hard, and the claw prints worn and splayed with age. Three nights ago, after the rain when the moon was full, an old female leopard came from the same direction she had, stopped to drink, then headed up the ridge, aiming for the thickly wooded crest separating the forest from the cultivated lands beyond. Any leopard with business beyond the ridge could easily be a stock thief or man-eater.

Not a cat she cared to meet. Stomach tensed, she looked about. Mossy patches shone like polished jade. The protective rune on her armlet shielded Katya from magic — but not from fang or claw. Straightening up, she set out again, keeping the breeze at her back. Leopards did not know humans have no sense of smell, and never stalked from upwind — so she need only worry about what lay ahead. These were her woods. Let some old leopard scare her, and she would never go out at all.

"Katea-katea-katea...." She spotted a flash of orange among the pine trunks. The bird waited at the crest of the ridge.

And not just the firebird, but a fire as well. Black oily smoke billowed from beyond the ridge crest, smearing clear blue sky. Hairs rose at the nape of her neck. She had not smelled the smoke because the wind was behind her — but she knew where it came from. Byeli Zamak was burning.

Topping the ridge, she stopped to stare. This was as far as the slave collar allowed her to go. Below her the forest ended. Rolling steppe spread out from the foot of the ridge, broken by loops of river, dark patches of ploughland, and the onion domes of village churches. Between her and the steppe, guarding the fords of the Dys, stood a huge round tower seven stories tall with walls twenty feet thick — Byeli Zamak, the White Castle. Smoke poured from the tower. Katya pictured the inferno inside, fed by grain and oil stored in the basement, burning up through the wooden floors, feeding on gilt furniture, Barbary tapestries, Italian paintings, and canopied beds. A cornerstone of her world was consumed in flames.

She came from these settled lands. Somewhere out there she had been born. Somewhere out there her family was massacred — for the black earth beyond the woods was sown with bones and watered by blood. Constant strife had consumed her family, and almost made an end to her. She had begged in those villages, and slept in the painted doorways of those churches, waking to find crows and ravens waiting to make a meal of her.

When she was given to the Witch, all that changed. Her slave collar kept her penned in the woods — where the worst she need fear was leopards and troll-bears. Even when old King Demitri died, Byeli Zamak remained, towering over the fords of the Dys — the gatehouse to the Iron Wood. King and gold-domed capital were the stuff of faerie tales, but Byeli Zamak was solid and real, part of Katya's landscape, built by earth giants from native stone. And now it burned. Her first thought was to tell the Bone Witch.

"Katea-katea...." the firebird called again, this time from right overhead. Looking up, she saw the flame-colored jay perched on the limb of a tall larch, scoffing and chuckling. Clown prince of the bird clan, the fire orange jay was a wickedly mischievous trickster, a merciless nest robber and accomplished mimic. Katya had heard him perfectly imitate the screaming whistle of a hawk, just to see what havoc he could wreak.

"Is this what you saw?" Katya tilted her head toward the inferno below. Just like a jay to revel in someone else's misfortune. He squawked back at her, this time giving the man call. Jays greeted every predator with a different call. Warnings did little good if you did not know whether to look out for a leopard, or a hawk, or a lynx. The man call was totally distinct. Jays did not use it for her or the Witch.

Hearing a waxwing whistle, Katya turned to see a roe deer bound up the slope and disappear over the ridge. Something was coming. Something alarming enough to flush a doe from cover. The firebird flew off, still making the man call.

From below came the weighty clump of slow hoofbeats climbing the ridge. A horse was coming up from the fords, carrying something heavy and clanking. She whispered her invisibility spell. So long as she remained still and silent, no one could see her. Or so the Witch said. So far it had never failed.

She watched the rider top the ridge. Bareheaded, he rode slumped forward, eyes half shut, his soot-stained blue and white surcoat covering a body encased in steel — a man-at-arms, maybe even a knight, just managing to stay atop a big gray charger. Her heart went out to him. He looked so hurt and handsome, his long elegant eyelashes wet with tears. Bloody clots in his fashionable pudding-basin haircut dripped red streaks down proud cheekbones, past genteel lips. His beardless face made him look young, marking him as a foreigner. Or a eunuch.

Here was her storm petrel: strong and beautiful, but a sure sign of the whirlwind to come. So long as Byeli Zamak had held for the King, only unarmed serfs crossed the fords into the forest, to gather sticks and snare squirrels, stripping bark for their shoes and stealing honey from the bees. On May Day they came singing, their arms full of flowers, celebrating the return of spring, slipping off in pairs to make love upon the forest floor — while she watched, invisible and intrigued. In summer the forest rang with their axes — the nearest thing they had to weapons. It was a flogging offense for a serf to have a bow, or a boar spear. Death to be caught with a sword.

But this stranger had a huge sword slung across his back, and his torn surcoat bore the embattled blue bend of the King's Horse Guards. His crested helm hung from his saddle bow, alongside an ugly saw-toothed war hammer. Hunched forward, he carried something heavy in the crook of his shield arm, wrapped in silk embroidery, tucked against his armored breast. She stood stock still, letting him rattle past, close enough to touch.

When he had gotten far enough ahead of her, she set off after him, slipping silently from tree to tree, following the bird calls down the ridge

onto the forest floor. Tiny red flecks of blood shone on green fern fronds, marking his trail for her.

Now the breeze was full in her face, which she did not like. A leopard could come up behind her, stalking her as easily as she trailed this knight. Worse yet, the breeze brought the foul scent of a troll-bear's lair, faint but growing stronger. The rotting corpse smell of discarded carcasses, mixed with the rank odor of the troll-bear's droppings, was unmistakable, like smelling a long dead lizard on a hot day. Only the image of the knight's hurt face kept her going.

She nearly caught up with her knight beneath a cool coppice of oaks. Leaves rustled like water overhead and the rattle of armor had ceased — but the smell of horse droppings, followed by a nervous whinny, warned her she was getting too close. Sinking to all fours, she wriggled through the undergrowth, curious to see why he had stopped. Had he smelled the troll-bear?

Her knight had dismounted. Kneeling in the bracken beside his horse, he attacked the ground with a big saxe knife, digging a hole in the dark earth. She watched patiently. When he had dug down the length of his arm, he sheathed the knife, and reached for an embroidered bundle lying beside him. Gently he lowered the bundle into the hole. Whatever it was had to be something precious — she could tell by how he handled it. A gold icon perhaps. Or a great crystal goblet. Or a dead baby.

He carefully covered over the hole, hiding his work with fallen leaves. Then he looked up, sensing he was watched, staring straight at her. But she stayed still as a fawn, and the spell held. Drained by the simple act of digging, he heaved himself onto his horse, no mean feat in full armor. Then he lurched off upwind, headed for the troll-bear's lair. Unless she did something the troll-bear would savage both horse and rider, cracking her knight's armor like a badger breaking open a snail.

When the carrion odor got unbearable, his horse stopped again, refusing to go on. She waited for her knight to turn or dismount, but he stayed slumped in his saddle, eyes closed, his horse nervously cropping the bracken. Warning calls died away and the woods grew still. A good sign. Either the troll-bear was gorged senseless, or away from its den. Shrugging off her spell, she stepped out from between the trees, slowly walking toward her knight. His horse saw her first, snorting and shying.

Speaking softly, she reached out and took the reins, "Have no fear. I will take you to good grass and water."

Her knight opened his eyes, which were blue and alert. He smiled at what he saw, saying, "*Mon Dieu*, I am dead." He did not look very dead, clinging stubbornly to his saddle. "And here is an angel to take me to Heaven."

"I am no angel," she told him. She was a witch-child, willful, disobedient and hopelessly damned.

His smile widened. "Then a forest sprite, young and beautiful. What more could a vagabond want?" He spoke with a funny foreign accent, but his tone told her he was friendly. Gently turning the tired horse's head, she led him slowly downwind away from the troll-bear's lair. Her knight swayed alarmingly in the saddle. "Fair nymph," he called down to her. "Where are you taking us?"

She smiled over her shoulder. "To water." He was by far the most marvelous thing she had ever found in the woods, and she wanted to see him with his face washed.

Leading the horse back to the base of the ridge — to where a spring burst from beneath tall triangular rocks — she helped her knight dismount. Sitting him down, she wet a cloth and wiped his wincing face. He cleaned up nicely. She liked his handsome beardless face, firm and manly, but smooth to the touch. His scalp wound was bloody but not deep, and merely needed to be cleaned, then sewn shut. Luckily she knew which plants produced natural antibiotics, had been gathering them for the Witch.

He watched as she worked, smiling ruefully. "Just when you wonder what you are fighting for, Heaven sends a reminder."

"What reminder is that?" She searched through her bark basket for the right leaves.

"You really do not know, do you?"

"No. That is why I asked." Her knight had a funny way of talking, even for a foreigner. She crushed the leaves with a rock, mixing them with water from the spring.

"I have had a most damnable day," he told her, "trying to hold Byeli Zamak for your infant Prince Ivan. Besieged by the boy's own uncle, upholding the honor of your dead king, and being badly beaten for my

pains. Just when I think I cannot go on — that there is nothing in this benighted land worth saving — you come along. Proving me completely wrong."

"This will hurt," she warned him, parting his hair to expose the wound.

"*Certainement*; so far today, everything has." Taking that as assent, she poured her makeshift potion onto the bloody gash. He shouted in protest, raising a steel-gloved hand to shield his head. "*Merde!* Does *Mademoiselle* mean to murder me too?"

She grabbed his gauntlet to keep it away from the wound. "No. This will help you. I swear." She found her embroidery needle with her free hand.

He relaxed. "*C'est bien, c'est bien. Mademoiselle* merely took me by surprise." He sat stoically while she poured potion on the needle, then began sewing his scalp back together, wincing when she tightened a stitch, but otherwise acting as if she were clipping his curls. Asking, "What may I call *Mademoiselle*?"

"Katya," she replied shyly, resisting the impulse to invent. She wanted him to know her name.

"*Enchanté*. Sir Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile, et le Baron d'Roye. At your service." He winced again, as her needle went in. "What does *Mademoiselle* do when not torturing wounded knights?"

She pulled the stitch tight, saying softly, "I serve the Bone Witch."

"A Witch? But of course. And a wicked one too, from the way that potion burned me...."

"But she is merely my foster mother. My real mother was a queen. And I am a princess." Not knowing who her parents were, she felt free to invent royal ones.

Baron d'Roye raised an eyebrow. "Princess in disguise, I presume?"

"Of course," she replied scornfully. "Why else would I be dressed like a peasant?"

"Your majesty carries off her masquerade amazingly well."

"Shush!" she whispered. From atop the ridge came the firebird's man call. She listened harder. The call came again, fading as the bird took flight. Someone was coming. She asked, "Are there men after you?"

"Indeed, though for no good reason."

She hastily finished her stitching, saying, "I must hide you." She had no fear for herself, but the thought of seeing her newfound knight hurt or killed was too much to bear. Helping him to his feet, she guided him up the rocks to a protruding shelf where two boulders formed a tiny cave between them, too high up to be seen from the spring. She shoved him inside, saying, "Stay here."

"Only if your majesty promises to come for me," he replied.

"I will." She truly wanted to see more of him, only not right now. Not with men coming.

"Promise?"

"I swear." She pushed him further into the cave, where there was no chance of him being seen from below.

"Bring food," he begged.

"I will," she hastily agreed.

"And wine."

She did not bother to answer, scrambling back down the rocks to the spring. Taking his mount's reins, she turned the horse away from the spring.

"Good wine. If your highness has it."

Still thirsty, the horse balked at being led off by a stranger. She had to heave on the reins to get him pointed back the way she wanted to go. Her knight called down to her, "And what about my horse?"

"I will hide him too," she promised, pulling harder, hauling the unwilling animal away from the spring.

"*Au revoir*," he called out.

"Silence, please," she shouted back, mortified to be making so much noise with strangers in the woods. Dragging the weary charger away from rest and water, she doubled back on their original tracks. Anyone seeing the return prints would have no reason to search out the cave, and would follow the trail she was making. Katya felt confident she could lose them — these were her woods.

When she had put distance between herself and the spring, she found a swift brook and splashed along it, letting the running water hide their trail. Spotting a good place to leave the stream — a rock shelf that would not take hoof prints — she deliberately passed it by. Downstream from the rock shelf she let the horse stray, making tracks on the bank, then leading

him back into the water, and up onto the opposite bank. When she was satisfied with her false trail, she carefully retreated upstream, leading the horse out over the rocks, trying her utmost not to leave tracks.

She stayed on hard ground until she was well out of sight of the stream, and could no longer hear its rippling. Then she tied the horse to a tree and went back alone. Walking as lightly as she could, she covered up any sign of the horse's passing, smoothing over stray prints, and sprinkling dust where they had wet the rocks. When she reached the stream, she whispered her spell, lying down to watch.

She waited, her heart beating against the hard stone. On the far side of the stream she saw a splendid spider web, shot with rainbows. Worth coming back for when she was not so busy. In the meantime she thought about her knight. He had a funny foreign way of talking, but that only made him more special. He had a good heart as well, she knew by the way he spoke to her. He even seemed to like her, though that was a lot to hope for.

First she heard warning calls — the indignant chatter of a red squirrel, the rasping cry of a frightened pine tit. Followed by the voices of men, and the neighing of their horses. They came slowly downstream, searching both banks, looking for the spot where she left the water.

One huge fellow in half-armor and big bucket-topped riding boots urged his mount up onto the rock shelf, coming so close she could count the flanges on the heavy steel mace hanging from his saddle bow. Matted hair and flecks of blood clung to the sharp steel. He wore his sallet tipped back, searching the ground for tracks. His hard bearded face could not compare to the clean elegant features of Sir Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile. But his surcoat had the same embattled blue bend as her knight's — charged with a sable crescent, the badge of Prince Sergey Mikhailovich, Grand Duke of Ikstra. Crown Prince Ivan's belligerent uncle. She held her breath as he studied the spot where she led the charger out of the stream. Did he see something? A crushed leaf or overturned stone? The scrape mark of a steel shoe?

Calls came from downstream. They had found her false trail. Prince Sergey's man-at-arms turned his horse about, splashing back into the stream. She was safe — for now. When the calls faded into the forest, she slid back off the rocks, and carefully made her way to where she had

tethered the horse. The Witch would scold her if she did not return soon with her bark basket full of herbs and fungus.

As she set out, clouds of little white butterflies whirled up from patches of sunlight, fluttering between the horse's legs, then darting off between the trees. The deeper she went into the woods, the less she worried about hiding her trail. The only warning calls were for her. At the head of Long Lake, she saw wild swans swimming on clear water fringed by pines.

Beyond the lake the pine wood ended. On the far side stood a forest of black iron trunks with stark metal branches — the Iron Wood — a cold dark barrier reeking of magic, stretching over the hills to the east, lifeless and forbidding. She led the reluctant horse into the black leafless wood. Spiked branches closed around her, and forest sounds faded. No woodpeckers beat at the hard metal bark. No squirrels ran along the blade-like limbs. No living beasts made their home in the Iron Wood — just trolls and siren spirits, witches and the walking dead.

Happy to be nearly home, she threaded her way through the thorny metal maze. Finally a clearing appeared ahead, a white patch amid the black tangle. She led the big war horse up to a tall white hut made entirely of bones, long white thigh bones as big as a man, stacked one atop the other like grisly logs. Serfs called them dragon bones, but Katya knew better. They came from a long-haired, elephant-trunked monster that once roamed the northern tundra, bigger by far than any Barbary elephant. She had seen their great curved tusks in a forest bone pit, along with bits of the hairy hide.

Huge antlers from an ancient giant elk hung above the Bone Hut's leather door. Swallows nested in nooks beneath the eaves. Little chestnut-throated birds peered out of the mud nests at her. Their parents flew back and forth, chattering at her, then streaking off in the direction of Long Lake, coming back with ants, gnats, wasps, and assassin bugs to feed their young.

Slowly the skin door swung open, and the Bone Witch emerged. Older than sin, and grim as death, the Witch wore a knuckle bone necklace and a linen winding sheet for a dress. White hair hung down to bare skeletal feet. Around her thin waist was a wormwood belt, supporting the thief-skin bag that held her charms. The horse backed and snorted at the sight of her.

She muttered a charm and the shying charger relaxed. "A beautiful beast," the Bone Witch declared. "Where did you find him?"

"In the woods." Katya had always brought lost or strayed animals out of the woods. Fallen eagle chicks. Little lame squirrels. Orphaned leopard cubs. This war horse was by far her most impressive find. She made no mention of his master. The Bone Witch had warned her not to bring men into the Iron Wood. Abandoned cubs and a weary war horse were one thing — but no stray knights. No matter how handsome and helpless they looked.

She held out her basket to show she had not wasted the whole morning, saying, "Byeli Zamak has been burned."

The Witch nodded, "I smelled it on the wind." It was impossible to surprise the Bone Witch.

"And a leopard drank from the pond beneath the ridge."

The Witch nodded again. "Three nights ago, when the moon was full." Accepting the fungus, the Witch told her to give the gray charger a rubdown, "And see he has grass and water. You cannot bring things home unless you care for them."

"I will, I will," she assured the Witch. And went to work at once, taking the horse around to the paddock behind the bone hut, rubbing him down, giving him water and barley. Filling a bark basket with food, she got out the Witch's steel sickle, saying she would go cut grass at Long Lake. Nothing a horse could live on grew in the Iron Wood.

The Witch sniffed her basket. "And you will take food to the knight hiding in the cave by the spring?"

She gave a guilty nod.

"You are free to play with whatever you find in the woods, so long as your chores do not go wanting."

"Oh, no! I will gather more fungus, and webs for spinning. See, I am taking my spindle."

The Witch shook her head. "Your youth will be the death of me. Always rushing life along."

"No! Never." She kissed the Witch's cold wrinkled lips. "You will always be here." The Bone Witch had been in the Iron Wood forever.

"Of course, but what has that to do with it?" The Witch shooed her out of the hut.

As the Witch predicted, she went straight to the cave, fearing she would find it empty. Nearing the spring, she stopped to listen. And heard nothing. Maybe he had obeyed her and stayed in the cave. More likely he was long gone.

She was thrilled to find herself wrong. "*Bonjour*," he greeted her with a grin when she stuck her head into the cave. Heaving himself upright, he peered at her basket. "What is this? Food, how wonderful! Did you bring wine as well?" She admitted she had not, having never so much as seen a grape. "Alas, too bad. But this is magic enough. Is there meat?"

"*Kalbasa*." She doled out a length of smoked sausage.

"Excellent, good old *kalbasa*, and bread too. What a wonderful wood sprite. Would there be caviar to go with it?"

"There is." She showed him the gleaming fish roe wrapped in a cool leaf. Long Lake teemed with sturgeon.

"Caviar! Fantastic. What a feast!"

"And *myot* also." She showed him the comb.

"Honey. How delightful."

"And yogurt."

"Ah yes, Markovy's answer to sour milk."

"And *diynya*."

"*Diynya*?" He looked puzzled.

She lifted the melon from the bottom of the basket, holding it out to him. "*Diynya*."

"Of course. *Diynya*. How utterly delicious." Taking the melon, he kissed her. "*Merci beaucoup, Mademoiselle* wood sprite."

Her lips tingled from her first kiss by a grown man. The lumpish son of the family she lived with once held her down and tried to kiss her, but she bit his tongue. This was completely different. Delicious shivers shot through her, raising goosebumps from nipples to her groin. That he did it quickly and casually did not matter. Nor did it matter that he had clearly forgotten her name. It was enough that she remembered his, Sir Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l'Étoile, et le Baron d'Roye. She felt utterly ecstatic, having her first real kiss come from someone so special. Not just a knight, but a lord. And hers to feed and care for.

Making her worry all the more for him. "Why do they want to harm you?"

"Rank prejudice," he replied, spreading caviar with his thumb. "Pure silly superstition."

She broke open the melon, sipped the juice, and passed it to him. "But why would Prince Ivan's uncle attack Byeli Zamak?"

He heaved a sigh. "*Mademoiselle* does not live in a nation. Markovy is a collection of family quarrels with vague boundaries, whose preferred form of government is civil war. Being a foreign heretic, I do not give a lead sou who wins — but I swore an oath to your king, to uphold his honor and his heir. Not that noble oaths mean a lot when you are having your head beat in."

Getting over her goosebumps, she took her spindle from the basket, and started to spin spider's thread from a web she had found on the way. Working the tiny threads relaxed her.

"Markovites are the most superstitious folk in creation," he complained between bites. "Believing in all manner of faeries, imps, djinn, witches and whatnot. Byeli Zamak supposedly held a magic treasure — the Firebird's Egg. A marvelous tale. And Prince Sergey is an utterly gullible Grand Duke, who thinks this mythical egg will make him master of Markovy. But I held Byeli Zamak for Prince Ivan, and King Demitri before him. As Castellan I would know if Byeli Zamak held such an egg. And it does not."

Katya herself absolutely believed in the Firebird's Egg. King Demitri had stolen the Egg from its nest deep in the Iron Wood, and kept it locked in a cool deep basement vault beneath Byeli Zamak — where it would not hatch and would always be his. It had been King Demitri's greatest treasure, and his greatest curse. Making his life tragic and miserable. The curse cost him both his wives, and all his children, except for Ivan, his heir. Why Ivan's uncle would want the ill-fated egg was totally beyond her — but that did not mean it did not exist.

Her knight told more stories, of far-off Gascony where he was born, and how he lost everything and ended up in exile. "I possess an astounding ability to choose the losing side. Counting this latest debacle at Byeli Zamak, I have been in half a dozen pitched fights — and have always come out a loser. A remarkable record, not easily achieved. When I sided with the English they lost to the King of France. When I switched my allegiance to the King, he lost to the English. Scots in the French service call me

'Tyneman' in tribute to my many defeats. An honor really. Any lout with a bit of ability can run off a string of victories. But to lose every time — that requires not just talent, but uncanny luck as well."

"I cannot believe your luck could be so bad." She did not want to believe anything bad about him.

"Bad luck?" He laughed. "Not in the least, my luck is excellent. Could not be better."

"Really? But is it not better to win than lose?"

"Better perhaps — but not always easier. Anyone can survive a victory, just stay to the back and shout loudly. But surviving six defeats is a rare feat. Requiring more than a swift horse. Twice — at Lipan and St. Jacob-on-Bris — I was the only one not killed or taken. That is phenomenal luck."

"I mean, I do not believe you must always lose."

He scoffed at her innocence. "Tell it to the Swiss. They were near unbeatable until I sided with them."

By now dusk was settling outside the cave. Shafts of golden light slanted between the trees, slicing deep into the forest. Having seen her knight fed and cared for, she needed to get back and cut grass for his horse, then see to the Witch's supper, making the most of the long summer twilight. Sadly she took her leave, fairly sure he would not wander off in the short night, and meaning to be back by morning. D'Roye declared himself devastated to see her go, cheering her immensely. She finally had her knight in armor. Who cared if he was a foreigner, and somewhat the worse for wear — a footloose loser from some far-off land?

Before returning to the Witch, she had one more thing to do. Cautiously she snuck up on the troll-bear's lair, hoping her own scent would be hidden by the carrion stink. When she found the spot she sought, she dug down into the deep forest loam, using the Witch's steel sickle. She glanced repeatedly over her shoulder, uncomfortably aware that she had watched her knight dig in this exact spot without him knowing it.

Setting aside the sickle, she dug the last few inches with her hands, not wanting to harm what lay hidden in the hole. Finally she felt something soft and warm beneath her fingers. Brushing aside the last of the dirt, she recognized the embroidered tapestry her knight had kept next to his armored breast. Unwrapping the tapestry, she felt the smooth hard surface underneath, the warm, living Firebird's Egg.

She folded the tapestry back over the Egg, then refilled the hole, happy her knight had not lied to her. He claimed that as Castellan he would have known if Byeli Zamak held such a magical egg — and it did not. But that was because he had escaped Byeli Zamak with it, and buried it here by the troll-bear's lair. Being a born romancer, she took such truthful misdirection as a sign of true love.

Prince Sergey

SHE MEANT to see her knight right after morning chores, before he could wander away from the cave — but the Bone Witch had a dozen things for her to do. For no apparent reason the Witch wanted the swallow's nests taken from under the eaves, and her pet rats turned loose, then her favorite fetishes hung on branches in the Iron Wood. So many pointless tasks that she suspected the Witch of trying to keep her from seeing D'Roye. The Bone Witch's motives were as obscure as her methods.

The rats seemed happy to be set free, but the swallows complained bitterly, chattering shrilly and darting at her head. It was useless to tell them that Witch ordered the mass removal. While she battled indignant swallows, the Witch sat at her bone table writing on thin strips of Chinese paper in her little cramped script. Tying these tiny messages to the feet of her carrier pigeons, the Witch released the pigeons one by one, sending them off into the blue summer sky.

Katya asked what was so important that the Witch must tell the world. The Bone Witch shushed her. "Be patient. In time all comes clear."

So the Witch always said. Katya returned to her tasks, working until the Bone Hut looked positively bare. Since the day she arrived the chaos of her new home had fascinated her — fetishes decorating bone rafters, swallows darting in and out, pigeons cooing in the eaves, rats peering from wicker cages, all lit by tulip-shaped paper lanterns. It took her mind off the terror of belonging to a witch. She fully expected to be cooked and eaten, unless the Witch chose to have her raw. Soon Katya realized that she would have to do the cooking — but by then chores and boredom made her treasure the hut's distractions. Now it chilled her to see her home so neat.

All the animals were gone, except for her knight's horse in the paddock out back. She hoped this latest mad impulse did not last.

Finally the Witch agreed to let her go. "There is nothing else for you to do here. Now go and make your way in the world. Be smart. Be brave. Think of me now and again. And if you ever need help, call on me. No matter how far you go, or what you become, I will be with you."

Katya told her she was only going to take breakfast to her knight. And her slave collar kept her from going much farther — but the Witch had a way of seeing grand drama in the most mundane things, like the song of a lark, or the first buds of spring. "Do not worry, I will be back in the afternoon."

"No, you won't," the Bone Witch replied. "Always remember, I tried to care for you and teach you trollcraft. Now recite your spell."

She recited her invisibility spell, grabbed up her basket and headed for the Iron Wood, happy to be free of the Witch — if only for a while.

She did not get far. There were no warning cries in the Iron Wood. No birds or squirrels to keep watch for her. She was concentrating on the winding trail through the metal trunks, when she caught a whiff of horses on the wind. Horses meant men. She froze, whispered her spell, and waited — hoping her heart was not banging too loud.

Hearing the clip-clop of iron-shod hooves, she realized they were riding down the crooked trail toward the Bone Witch's hut — coming in twos, to save getting slashed by spiked branches. In a moment they would be riding right over her, invisible or not. She turned and dashed back the way she had come. Byeli Zamak had been gone for only a day, and already men were coming farther than she ever thought possible. At the clearing in the metal wood, the Bone Witch stood waiting by her skin door, a grim smile on her wrinkled face. Katya told the sorceress she had heard horsemen coming, but the Witch merely nodded. Had the Witch known about these horsemen? Probably. The Bone Witch had sent her off with her basket and spell, knowing full well that she would not get far.

Hoofbeats grew louder as the column of riders neared the clearing. She waited alongside the Witch, curious to see what sort of horsemen dared come into the Iron Wood. But the first figure to appear was not on horseback — and only half a man. Man-shaped and naked, he strolled lithely into the clearing, covered head to foot with soft brown hair. His eyes were wolf's eyes. Canine fangs protruded from thin smiling lips.

Lycanthrope. She had never seen one like this before — few had and lived. He was not the harmless sort who totally shed human form to run with the wolves and mate with the bitches. He was a soulless demon from deep in the Iron Wood — the absolute worst of wolf and man. Or so the Witch always told her.

Behind him rode an incongruous pair. The taller of the two was a steel-helmeted horse archer wearing a blue Horse Guard's brigandine studded with silver nail heads. He had a huge dead swan hanging from his high saddle. Riding at his side was a dwarf mounted on a pony, wearing a parti-colored tunic and a fool's cap. More horsemen filed into the clearing behind them, spreading out from their column of two's — horse archers, knights, and men-at-arms, followed by squires and valets, even a steward and a butler in their uniforms of office. And an Ensign, holding up a grand duke's banner, with a black crescent and the lightning stroke sign of Ikstra. Beneath the banner rode Prince Sergey himself. Katya had never seen a prince of the blood before, but there was no mistaking this one. Grand Duke Sergey was a prince from the bootheels up, wearing silver-chased armor and a gold coronet on his old-fashioned great helmet. He had his visor tipped back and she could see the hard cold sheen in his pale blue eyes, glinting like dangerous ice in the spring.

He stared evenly at the aged Bone Witch — two of the most feared people in Markovy were meeting for the first time. Totally different, yet each in their own way absolutely terrifying. Prince Sergey, Grand Duke of Ikstra, broke the frosty silence, "Good morrow, grandmother, we are trailing a mounted knight, riding a gray war horse and wearing a blue-and-white surcoat. He is most likely wounded. Have you seen him?"

"No, my lord," replied the Bone Witch. "Not him, nor anyone like him."

"Strange," mused Prince Sergey, "our wolfman trailed his horse straight to this clearing." The Lycanthrope stood waiting, a hideous look on his fanged face, clearly hoping to make a meal out of someone. "He was Castellan of Byeli Zamak, and claims to be a baron."

"And yet I have not seen him," the Witch insisted.

Prince Sergey looked to the dwarf sitting on his pony. Rising in his saddle, the dwarf took a deep breath through his nose. Two more sniffs, and the dwarf settled back in the saddle, saying, "She is telling the truth."

Prince Sergey nodded. Then his gaze turned to Katya, staring at her like she had failed to pay her squirrel tax. "What about the girl? Has she seen him?"

The "girl" gulped. "No, my lord, never." She shook her head vigorously, shrinking back beside the Witch.

Prince Sergey looked again at the dwarf. This time the little man swung off his pony, and walked over to her. His head came up to Katya's waist. Lifting his nose, he sniffed her belly, then ran his nostrils down her thigh. He stepped back, saying, "She is lying."

Sergey raised an eyebrow. "Has she seen the Castellan?" His dwarf shrugged. The little man was a lie sniffer, not a mind reader. His majesty turned back to her, "Have you seen a knight wearing blue and white?"

She had no good answer, caught between her need to lie, and knowing the dwarf would sniff her out. Anything she said would put her at the mercy of these men. The wolfman leered at her. He was the one who had found her. Without him, this clumsy crowd of horsemen could not have trailed her from the stream — but a Lycanthrope can track a mouse on a moonless night.

"Well, have you seen him?" the Grand Duke demanded.

Before she could think of some truthful misdirection, a shout of triumph came from the back of the Bone Hut. A couple of squires came around the corner proudly leading her knight's horse. Someone called out, "That's his horse. The big gray that belongs to the Castellan."

Prince Sergey stared hard at the horse, then looked back at her. "Have you seen the knight who rode this horse?"

She nodded dumbly, unable to come up with anything but the truth, though she knew it would doom her.

"Good," the Grand Duke concluded, "we are at last getting somewhere. Do you know where he is?"

"Not for certain." He could be long gone from the cave. In fact she fervently hoped he was.

Prince Sergey smiled, a chilling, terrible sight. "Nothing in life is certain — but I wager this will be sure enough." He turned to his Ensign, saying, "Pay her for the girl."

Taking his reins in his banner hand, the Ensign fished a gold coin out of his purse, tossing it at the naked feet of the Witch. The Bone Witch made

no attempt to pick up the coin. "That is for the girl," the Ensign explained.

"She is not for sale," replied the Witch.

"Give her the whole purse," the Grand Duke ordered impatiently. His Ensign tossed the purse down beside the coin — but the Witch ignored it as well.

"What do you want, grandmother?" Grand Duke Sergey seemed astonished that the Bone Witch refused his generosity.

"For you to leave." There was a hint of warning in the Witch's answer.

"We will," Sergey agreed, "when we have the girl."

"She is under my protection," the Witch insisted.

Grand Duke Sergey glared at her. Katya could feel the tension in the clearing. Two dozen armed men sat loafing in the saddle, backed by valets, pages, a steward and butler. Horses looked on with equine curiosity. The Lycanthrope stood waiting, aching to use his fangs and claws. "By rights I could have you burned," Prince Sergey pointed out.

"Do it if you dare," replied the Witch, unworried by the prince's power.

Sergey motioned for his archers to dismount, saying, "Seize the girl."

Horried, Katya stepped back toward the skin door. This was all her fault. She had brought the horse to the Bone Hut. An archer tried to brush past the Witch to grab her — but the Bone Witch shoved him sideways, landing him in a heap. Two archers seized the Witch's arms, but she whirled about, faster than the eye could follow, sending the armored pair flying to opposite ends of the clearing. Another archer tried to draw his sword, but the Witch reached out and grabbed his wrist, twisting it until it snapped. His blade dropped from limp fingers.

Archers fell back, appalled by the old woman's strength. The Lycanthrope dropped to a crouch, prepared to spring. Prince Sergey shouted, "Use your bows — but do not hit the girl. I will flay the man that misses."

A half dozen arrows leaped from their bows, striking the Witch in the chest and hip. She hardly even winced, standing between Katya and the men. Katya clung to the skin door, her fist jammed in her mouth, stifling a scream, aghast at what she had done.

More arrows thudded into the Witch. Painfully the old woman turned to face her. The Bone Witch's chest looked like a bloody pin cushion.

Arrows continued to hit her from behind. Staggering from the impact, the Witch opened her mouth as if she meant to speak. All that came out was a horrible gargling sound, followed by a great gout of blood. Shocked and sickened, Katya watched the Witch sink slowly to her knees.

"Stop shooting! Stop shooting!" Sergey cried. "You will hit the girl." Silence settled over the clearing as tears poured down Katya's cheeks. Half a dozen bows were pointed at her, arrows knocked and ready. She could see their gleaming chiseled steel points aimed at her chest. The Witch lay at her feet, feathered with arrows. Katya too expected to die — if not now, then soon.

Prince Sergey broke the silence, spurring his mount to put himself between her and the archers, shouting, "Down bows! Damn you! Down bows!"

Hurriedly his men obeyed. Wiping her tears away, Katya seized the Prince's stirrup. "Why did you kill her?" she wailed. "I am the one who lied."

Startled, Prince Sergey stared down in disbelief, as if astonished she could speak. "The Witch did not know where he was. You did." So the Witch died, and she lived — for now. "You do know where the Castellan is?" Sergey wanted to be sure.

She nodded. Any other answer would be her death warrant.

"And you can take us to him?"

She nodded again.

"Good." Prince Sergey pulled his boot from his stirrup, planted the heel on her shoulder and shoved, sending her sprawling. He waved to his men, "Burn the place. Burn the Witch's body. Burn it all."

Prince Sergey cantered off. For a moment she lay looking up at blue sky framed by black iron tree tops, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Without warning, a big bearded archer took the Prince's place. Looking down at her, he laughed, saying, "Here's a cute young case of the clap. And already on her back."

"Give your middle leg a rest," another archer advised.

"What do you mean?" the man asked indignantly. "I've not been fucked in a fortnight."

"Small wonder." The second archer helped her to her feet, brushing the dirt off her dress, which was spattered with the Bone Witch's blood.

Someone called out, "Does she have a name?"

"Do you?" asked the archer.

Of course, she thought — but all she said was, "Katya."

"She calls herself Katya." The horse archer was speaking to a huge man in an oversized suit of plate armor. Mounted on a big black Frisian, he towered over everything, seeming to reach right to the ridgepole of the Bone Hut. He wore the same blue-white surcoat as her knight, but many times bigger, and marked with the sword-and-shield badge of a Master-at-arms. Tipping back the visor on his German sallet, he asked her in a big booming voice, "Where do you come from, girl?"

Scared senseless, she still had the presence of mind to lie. "I am the daughter of a Kazak hetman, Kaffa Khan. Harm me, and he will come with a *tumen* of horse archers to hunt you all to death."

He laughed, saying, "Have knee-high give her a sniff."

She had forgotten about the Dwarf. Too much had happened since she last saw the little man. He walked over and took a deep sniff, then turned to the Master-at-arms, saying, "She lies."

The Master-at-arms did not look surprised — her lie had been feeble at best. "Come, my little khanum, give us the truth. Or I will see you suffer."

She admitted she did not know who her parents were, saying, "I was raised here, by the Witch." Mentioning the Bone Witch made her want to cry, but she stopped herself.

"Are you virtuous?" asked the Master-at-arms.

She stared dumbly up at him. What a stupid question to ask a witch-child. How could anyone be both damned and virtuous?

"There's your answer," the lecherous horse archer chuckled. "She does not even know what you are asking."

The Master-at-arms grinned, "Well, it is bad luck to execute a virgin...."

"Especially for the virgin," a horse archer added, getting a laugh from his fellows.

The Master-at-arms signaled for silence. "But in your case we will risk it. Stop your lying, and lead us to the Castellan. Otherwise we will have you flayed and left to fry in the sun. Unlucky or not. Do you understand?"

She understood.

He turned to the squires and archers, telling them to get busy, "Drag the Witch into the hut, and set it on fire." None too happy with their task, archers dragged the Witch's body into the Bone Hut. Katya watched them pile the straw beds atop the Witch, then throw on firewood, furniture, and the contents of the winter clothes chests. Dousing the pile with cooking oil, they set it alight. Soon the Bone Hut was blazing away. She saw her life going up in smoke and flames — just like Byeli Zamak.

"Mount up," the Master-at-arms ordered. Squires hoisted her aboard D'Roye's gray charger. One of them handed her the reins, and something to go with them. Looking down, she saw it was her straw doll — the one she had brought with her when she first came to live with the Witch. The young squire who had given it to her looked embarrassed. Of all these men — from Grand Duke Sergey down to the lowest valet — this boy alone seemed ashamed for what they had done.

The Master-at-arms gave her a grin that was all beard and teeth, saying, "Now lead us to the Castellan." She nodded, clutching the straw doll to her belly. Somehow, some way, she meant to come out of this alive and whole. But how that would happen, Heaven alone knew.

The Firebird's Egg

MOUNTED ON her knight's gray charger, she led the whole cavalcade along the winding trail out of the Iron Wood. The Master-at-arms rode beside her, with the dwarf mounted pillion behind him, and the Lycanthrope loping on ahead. Boxed in by armed ruthless men, she could neither lose them nor lie to them — not so long as they had the wolfman to track her, and the dwarf to sniff out her lies. Only a stroke of monumental good fortune could save her, and she had long ago learned she had to make her own luck.

Whenever the Master-at-arms questioned her directions, the dwarf made sure she told only the truth, putting a heavy burden on someone who always relied on lies. Whatever saved her now had to be the Lord's honest truth. At the head of Long Lake, hot perfumed pine scent replaced the cold metal odor of the Iron Wood. Swans clumped at the center of the lake,

already learning to be wary of the archers. She turned west, straight for the ridge line separating the forest from the steppe. The Master-at-arms looked askance. "You are leading us back toward Byeli Zamak?"

"That is where I left him, in a cave by the spring at the base of the ridge."

"Is that so?" he asked the dwarf riding behind him.

"She is telling the truth," replied the dwarf, looking pleased that she had learned not to lie.

The Master-at-arms turned back to her. "And this is the shortest way there?"

"Absolutely," she assured him. The dwarf confirmed her. An east wind had blown all morning, and she was determined to lead them straight downwind, avoiding the roundabout way she came the day before. No need now to hide her tracks. "If I take you right to him, will you let me go?"

"Of course, of course," the big man answered affably. But she was looking behind him at the dwarf, who glanced sharply up, saying nothing. Having a lie-sniffer riding on your horse's rump worked both ways. She had seen that same look of contempt on the dwarf's face when she tried to lie. The Master-at-arms did not mean to let her go. None of them did. Once she had served her purpose they would burn her as a witch. If they had not already promised her to the Lycanthrope.

As they plunged into the living wood, with its green trees and countless eyes, she heard a squirrel chatter, followed by the firebird's cry. It was not the flame jay's man call. She kept her eyes fixed on the path ahead, making sure the Master-at-arms got no warning from her. As the firebird's cry faded behind her, she strained her ears, trying to tell what was happening at the back of the column. All she could hear was the horse archers, laughing and joking behind her. They had a seemingly endless stock of sacrilegious stories to keep their spirits up.

Suddenly a scream rang out. The Master-at-arms grabbed her reins, looking back down the column. They waited. The story tellers fell silent. She watched little white butterflies dance in the sunlight. Presently a horse archer on a bay mare came galloping up. "What happened?" demanded the Master-at-arms.

"A leopard," the horse archer gasped.

"A leopard?" The Master-at-arms looked shocked.

"Yes, it dropped out of a tree on the last man in the column — Vasily, from Suzdal. He stopped to tighten his stirrup and take a piss. Before he could remount the cat was on him. By the time we got back to him, he was dead and the beast was gone."

"That makes no sense," complained the Master-at-arms. "A leopard attacking an armed man in daylight?" And from upwind, Katya added to herself, carefully searching the trees. A wood tit stared back at her. "No cat could be that hungry," insisted the Master-at-arms.

The horse archer shrugged. "The cat did not act hungry. It just broke Vasily's neck, then went on its way."

The Master-at-arms snorted, "Which makes even less sense. Sling his body over a horse, and tell Prince Sergey we are ready to move." The archer turned his bay mare about and went trotting back down the column.

Again they waited. Katya sat listening to the pines murmuring overhead. A woodpecker started to hammer, then stopped suddenly. Had it seen something? Slowly the profane stories reappeared — "A nun, a bishop, and a brothel keeper are in a boat. The bishop says to the nun...." She kept her ears tuned to the trees, listening for the woodpecker, and wondering why it was taking so long to get started again.

Finally Prince Sergey's Ensign trotted up, asking the same question, "Are you ready to move on? His highness means to be back at Byeli Zamak by dusk."

Rolling his eyes, the Master-at-arms told him, "I sent a man back saying we were ready to ride."

"What man?" asked the Ensign.

This provoked another commotion. A search failed to find the messenger, but did discover his bay mare, nervously cropping bracken in a nearby clearing. Fresh blood shone on her saddle. The Master-at-arms exploded, "This is absurd. We cannot sit here waiting to be eaten. Tell His Highness we are setting out — unless the leopard gets you first."

She started up again at a brisk trot. No one complained. Not with bloodthirsty leopards stalking the column. Men kept twisting in their saddles, glancing over their shoulders, looking everywhere but ahead. She saw a familiar break in the pines, backed by a tall stand of oaks. Since they were headed downwind there was no warning but the cry of a crossbill,

which the men ignored. Only the Lycanthrope looked uneasy, padding silently along, ears cocked forward, claws extended.

Suddenly the werewolf froze, hairs quivering. She braced herself. This was it. The next seconds would decide if she lived or died. The Lycanthrope spun about and vanished into the undergrowth. An archer called out, "What scared the wolfman? Why has he run off?"

As if to answer him, the troll-bear burst from his hidden lair, bellowing defiance at the intruders. Twice the size of a normal bear, with steel-hard hide and razor claws, the beast roared into the column, scattering men and horses. Rolling out of her saddle, Katya dropped to a crouch and whispered her spell. Instantly she vanished.

From her invisible crouch she got a close-up view of the swift horrific conflict. The troll-bear's forepaws flailed about, mace-headed battering rams slashing through plate armor like parchment. The Master-at-arms seized a lance from a squire, slapped down his visor, and charged the monster full tilt. His lance shattered on the troll-bear's hornlike hide. The enraged beast backhanded him out of the saddle, crushed him with a hind foot, then bit his horse's head off.

None of the other heroes who captured her tried to stop the troll-bear. The whole column — six lances of Horse Guards, with their attendant squires, valets, and archers, along with Prince Sergey's entourage of pages, Ensign, steward, and butler — vanished in an eyeblink, as if they too knew an invisibility spell. The troll-bear went howling after them, snapping pine saplings and uprooting boulders.

Which was why sensible woods creatures avoided a troll-bear's lair. The carrion stink was like a viper's hiss, a warning to unwary neighbors. Silence settled on the forest. Clutching her straw doll, she surveyed the new made clearing out the corner of her eyes. The worst part of being invisible was the inability to turn her head. Absolutely maddening when you wanted to know if it was safe to be seen. She was frozen in place staring at the armored leg of the Master-at-arms, sticking out from beneath a headless horse. She saw no sign of the dwarf who had been riding behind him.

Finally she made herself close her eyes, trusting in her ears to see behind her. Nothing. No warning cries, no rustle of leaves. No smell but the stink of troll-bear from somewhere upwind. She was free.

And alive. From the moment the Witch had died, she counted herself dead as well. Her demise seemed certain. She had let herself be tracked, and had gotten the Witch killed. And she was in the hands of men who meant to dispose of her in some grotesque fashion once she did their bidding. Now her life had been saved by a troll-bear. Few indeed could make that claim.

So what to do with her newfound freedom? Her first thought was for her knight. He was at the heart of this. He and the Firebird's Egg. She did not believe Prince Sergey would risk the Iron Wood just to put an end to some foreign born Castellan of Byeli Zamak. Love did not make her that blind. Her knight was not nearly as important as the Egg he had carried.

Moving stealthily downwind, ears tuned to the slightest sound, she crept up on the rocks and spring. She did not think any of the men could have caught up with her, even if they escaped the troll-bear. But having gotten her life back, she did not mean to let down her guard. Hot afternoon air hung heavy and expectant. And unnaturally quiet. Beyond the bubbling spring, the forest seemed to be holding its breath.

Suddenly she heard the firebird's shrill cry. She froze against a big boulder speckled with bird lime, whispering her spell. This was the second time today she had heard the bird's warning. It was as if the jay were watching over her. This cry was different than any she had heard before, the man-call mixed with an unfamiliar trill.

As she strained to survey the rocks without moving her head, a heavy form dropped on her from atop the boulder. Hairy arms seized her waist, and vice-hard thighs gripped her hips. Her struggles broke the invisibility spell, which had been no match for the Lycanthrope's supernatural senses. She was merely an unarmed young woman, fighting immensely strong arms, while the man-beast's fanged hairy face leered into hers.

Horried, she struggled harder. Keeping her arms pinned, the Lycanthrope dragged her back away from the spring — but did nothing else to harm her. No clawing. No fangs in the neck. Not reassuring in the least, with his steel-like erection digging into the small of her back.

Then she felt the Lycanthrope relax. Looking up, she saw horsemen staring down at her. Prince Sergey sat bareheaded on his charger, having lost his gold-crowned helmet. His Ensign was beside him, along with a single horse archer, several frightened squires, and a bedraggled looking

butler — all that was left of the proud cavalcade that had ridden boldly into the Iron Wood. The Lycanthrope must have been stalking ahead of them. Coming on her scent trail, he had gone up the backside of the boulder and dropped down onto her.

Prince Sergey trotted over to where she stood, glaring down at her. "Did you know we were riding into a troll-bear's lair?"

Her immediate impulse to lie died on her lips, when she spotted the dwarf riding behind the butler. She shook her head instead. "I will not tell you anything unless you let me go."

"Be cooperative," Prince Sergey warned. "I have only to say the word, and the beast holding you will savage you on the spot."

"You will not learn a lot from that," she pointed out.

"Yes," Sergey admitted, "but I might very much enjoy it." Nonetheless he waved to the wolfman. "Let her go,"

The Lycanthrope let go of her, a little victory, and likely to be her last. Katya took a deep breath, wishing she could just disappear right here. What had she done to deserve all this? Not a thing so far as she could see. Prince Sergey leaned forward in the saddle. "Now, tell us what we want to know."

"If I do, will you let me go?" She stared past the prince at the dwarf seated behind his butler.

"Just tell the truth, and you have nothing to fear."

The dwarf's nose wrinkled, as if he whiffed something foul. So much for honesty. Prince Sergey had no intention of freeing her. She closed her eyes, taking another slow breath, prolonging the inevitable. "What do you wish to know?"

"Tell where the Castellan is," Prince Sergey demanded, royally impatient.

"Right here," came the cheerful reply. Her eyes flew open. There was her knight, standing tall and nonchalant, sword in hand, a wry smile on his handsome face. Seeing him appear out of nowhere was like suddenly getting her life back. He made a mocking bow to Prince Sergey. "Baron Roy d'Roye, Chevalier de l' Étoile, and until late Castellan of Byeli Zamak. At your service."

Sergey sat up in the saddle. "My God! You! Why did you not open Byeli Zamak to me?"

Her knight shrugged armored shoulders. "You did not say *s'il vous plait*. King Demitri gave me Byeli Zamak to hold for his heir."

"I am Prince Ivan's uncle. Byeli Zamak should have come to me."

"And it has," D'Roye reminded him, smiling at his latest defeat.

Prince Sergey leaned forward again. "But not the Firebird's Egg."

"That is what brings us here." Her knight looked smug.

"So you have the Egg?"

"Not on me. But I know where it is."

"Where?" Sergey demanded.

"What will you pay to know?"

"Half my kingdom?" Sergey suggested sarcastically.

"I will give it up cheaper than that. Set this wood sprite free. Her and me, alive and ahorsed — that is all I ask."

Katya fought back tears. Her knight had given up his hiding place, and the Egg he protected, all to save her. A foolish impetuous gesture that would probably get them both killed. Still, she was touched.

"Almost too cheap," Sergey mused. "Generosity from an enemy is always suspect — but perhaps you are merely a fool."

"Obviously. Pray indulge me nonetheless."

"You, the girl, and two horses — easy enough." Sergey lifted a steel-gloved finger. "After I have the Egg."

"As you wish." Keeping his big two-handed sword drawn, her knight turned to her. "*Mademoiselle*, I must go with these men — hopefully I will be coming back with a pair of horses."

"She comes with us," Sergey insisted.

D'Roye rolled his eyes apologetically. "Alas, *Mademoiselle*, I fear this Grand Duke means it. Fortunately, it is but a short way into the forest...."

"By a stand of big oaks," she reminded him.

His eyes lit up. "I see you know the place."

She nodded excitedly. She knew better than he did. And the deeper they got into her woods, the safer they would be. Get far enough into the forest, and she and her knight were more than a match for any number of killers on horseback. But she did not say that aloud, for fear the killers would hear. She had to rely on him reading it in her smile.

He did seem to understand, setting out happily, not the least worried by the armed men around them, laughing, and making light of things. She

wanted to tell him about the Bone Witch, but that too must wait. This time they approached the troll-bear's lair from downwind — by far the safest direction. So long as you stayed out of the beast's hearing you had little to fear. But as soon as they whiffed the carrion scent, Prince Sergey's men revolted, none of them wanting a rematch with the monster. Their horses too refused to go any farther, shying and whinnying at the fearful stench.

Sergey immediately demanded that the dwarf sniff her knight for a lie. D'Roye submitted with good grace, for once having nothing to hide. But the dwarf went right up to him, sniffing vigorously. Katya could guess why. The little man desperately hoped to smell a lie. If her knight was telling the truth, they would have to march straight back toward the troll-bear's lair.

Finally, the dwarf admitted D'Roye smelled sincere. Sergey was forced to leave the horses and squires behind, but he bullied the Ensign, horse archer, and butler into accompanying him on foot. Katya did not fear any of these men half so much as she feared the Lycanthrope.

The dwarf did not get a choice. Like her, he was too valuable to leave behind, and would come whether he willed it or not. She went out of her way to comfort the little man, whose only concern was for the truth. He and the Witch were the only ones she had never been able to lie to, which she very much respected. "Stay close to me," she told him, "and I will try to see you are safe."

He looked warily up at her, "Is that so?"

"I thought you would know." He was the one with the supremely educated nose. As they set out walking, she slid her hand inside her dress, stroking the straw doll hidden next to her breast, just for luck.

When they got to the oak grove, the butler had to go down on his beribboned knees and dig for the Egg with his bare hands. Prince Sergey would not let him use so much as a toothpick, for fear of harming the Egg. Her knight stood watching calmly, leaning on his big two-handed sword. She motioned for the dwarf to get behind her. Which he immediately did, backing away toward the bushes. A bad sign — the little man who knew his master best was expecting the worst.

Reaching his hands into the hole, the butler drew forth the Firebird's Egg. As he unwrapped the dirty tapestry, everyone stared in awe at

Markovy's greatest wonder. Except for the Lycanthrope, who kept his hungry eyes fixed on her. What had he been promised when Prince Sergey had the Egg?

Her knight spoke first. "*Excusez-moi*, this may be exceptionally foolish of me, but I beg you to listen to the advice of your late king."

"What advice?" Sergey looked suspiciously at her knight, as if he was an insect with an especially annoying hum.

"King Demitri sent a deathbed message to me, ordering that this Egg be returned safely to its Nest. Not an easy task, but one I heartily endorse. There is a terrible curse on this Egg. How many lives has that damned Egg cost in the last two days alone?" Her knight was right, Byeli Zamak had been burned. And so had the Bone Hut. Prince Sergey's proud company had been reduced to a scared handful, standing around the magical Egg.

Prince Sergey gave a snort of contempt. "We need no lessons from the loser."

"There are worse things than losing," her knight pointed out. "My own fortunes have improved mightily since I put that ill-fated Egg in the ground."

"Really?" Prince Sergey arched an eyebrow.

"Absolutely." Her knight smiled at her. "I was beaten and bleeding, fleeing yet another defeat. But as soon as I parted from that Egg, there came this delightful forest nymph, stitching my wounds and serving me caviar."

"How lucky for you," Sergey laughed. "My own ambitions are a bit higher."

Her knight shrugged, "To each their own. Hopefully, King Demitri will know I tried. Now if I may depart with my own prize." He reached a steel-gloved hand out to her.

"You may inform Demitri in person." Prince Sergey nodded to the Lycanthrope. "Kill him and the girl is yours."

Faster than thought, the Lycanthrope leaped at D'Roye's throat, claws extended. But her knight had expected treachery. His blade came up in a terrific backhand swipe. Only the wolfman's supernatural agility saved him from being cut in two. Twisting in midair, the beast managed to evade the blade, landing on all fours.

All eyes were on her knight, so Katya stepped back against a tree,

whispering her spell. The dwarf had already vanished into the undergrowth. Holding her breath, she stood rigid, smelling sap sweating from the pine behind her, watching the fight and wanting to help, but not knowing how.

D'Roye kept his sword between himself and the werewolf, feinting and slashing. Despite his speed and cunning, the Lycanthrope could not get past the flashing blade. Twice he tried to duck under the sword, and got nicked in the shoulder and the ear. But the wolfman moved too fast for D'Roye to land a killing blow. Stalking sideways, he searched for an opening.

"Help the beast," Prince Sergey commanded. "Take him from behind."

His butler just stood there, stupidly holding the Egg — but the Ensign and horse archer obeyed, drawing their swords and trying to slide around behind D'Roye. So long as the Lycanthrope kept him busy in front, it would only be a matter of time before one of the others got at his back.

Being the bolder of the two, the Ensign was first to get in position. As D'Roye aimed a slash at the werewolf, the Ensign raised his own sword, stepping in to strike.

Seeing the Ensign lunge past her, Katya leaped forward, seizing the man's sword arm. Coming out of nowhere, she took the Ensign by surprise. As he struggled to shake her off, D'Roye spun about, hitting him a wicked two-handed blow just beneath the breastplate. Groaning, the Ensign went down, rattling like a pile of dropped pans.

Instantly the Lycanthrope bounded at D'Roye. But her knight seemed to know what was coming. Ignoring the downed Ensign, he let his momentum spin him completely about. This time his backhand caught the Lycanthrope between the neck and collarbone, severing the beast's jugular in a hideous spray of blood. The werewolf landed in a gory heap at his feet.

Strong arms grabbed her from behind. The horse archer had not dared to take on D'Roye, but he seized her to use as a living shield. Prince Sergey whipped his sword out, and she felt the sharp point at her throat. "Stop," the Grand Duke commanded. "Drop your sword or I will kill her."

Her knight let his point drop, saying, "Come now, Your Highness, that is hardly sporting. All we want is to be on our way."

"Drop your sword," Prince Sergey demanded. "Or I swear by God

Almighty I shall slit her throat."

With a sigh, D'Roye jammed his sword point first into the ground beside the dead Lycanthrope. Then he stepped back, away from the blade, folding his arms. "I warn you, this will bring nothing but grief."

"Perhaps," Sergey admitted with a grin. "But you will not be there to see it." Katya's heart sank. Her knight would die — merely for showing mercy — and she would have to watch. Sergey stepped toward D'Roye, hefting his sword.

As he did, a black and amber body dropped on him from the branches above. Prince Sergey gasped as the leopard sank her fangs into his neck. Staggering beneath the weight of the leopard the Grand Duke dropped to his knees, then pitched forward onto his face. Katya watched in astonishment as the big cat continued to bite down on the Grand Duke, making sure he never got up.

D'Roye jerked his sword out of the ground, saying to the horse archer holding her, "Let the girl go, if you want to live." The arms holding her vanished, and she heard footfalls behind her as the horse archer took off into the forest. Her knight turned to Prince Sergey's butler, who still held the Firebird's Egg, a sick look on his horrified face. "Carefully set down that Egg, and you too may go."

Placing the Egg gently on the ground, the butler backed slowly through the bracken, bumped into a tree, then turned and ran for his life. All that remained of Prince Sergey's expedition into the Iron Wood was a trio of bodies, lying around the Firebird's Egg. "*Mon Dieu*," D'Roye muttered, "that went far better than I could ever have imagined."

Slowly the leopard rose up, changing as she did, becoming a withered naked old woman with wrinkled skin and bone white hair. And not a single arrow mark on her. The Bone Witch smiled at Katya. "I told you I would be here if you needed me."

Her knight lowered his point and looked over at her. "This I suppose is your witch?"

She hastened to introduce the Bone Witch to her knight, proud of the way he went down on one knee before the withered old woman, saying, "*Madame* Witch, Baron Roy d'Roye, at your service."

"Is that just a gallantry," asked the Witch, "or are you really at my service?"

"Absolutely. *Madame* has saved my life, and I owe her anything that honor allows."

"Good," the Bone Witch declared, "I have need of your honor." Then the Witch turned to her. "Come here, my daughter."

She walked happily over, grateful to be free of Prince Sergey's killers and glad to see the Witch alive — but utterly ecstatic to have someone finally call her "daughter."

Giving her a wrinkled kiss, the Witch took the slave collar from around her neck. "Now I have one last chore for you."

"Whatever you wish." For once she truly meant it.

"Return the Firebird's Egg to its proper nest, so it may hatch and the curse on Markov can be lifted."

"But how will I get there?" She felt surprised the Witch would give her a task so important, and so seemingly impossible.

"These will take you there." The Witch snapped her bony fingers and a trio of horses ambled into the clearing — the knight's war horse, a black mare with a horse archer's bow and quiver hanging from her saddle, and a big bay palfrey laden with supplies. D'Roye's eyes lit up, seeing the gray charger he had clearly given up for lost.

"I mean, how will I find the Nest?" All Katya knew of the Firebird's Nest was that it lay deep in the Iron Wood.

The Witch gave a low call, holding out her finger, and the flame jay flew down to land on it. Stroking the bird's breast, the crone cooed, "You can take them there, can you not?" Throwing back his head, the jay gave a confident raucous reply, flying over to land on the black mare's saddle. "See," the Witch told her, "he is more than ready. Are you?"

Katya nodded solemnly, seeing that this is what the Witch had been training her for — how she would finally be "useful."

When she had the Egg safely tucked into the palfrey's pack saddle, Katya kissed the Bone Witch good-bye, and climbed onto the black mare. She watched her knight bow good-bye to the Witch, then mount his gray charger, grinning merrily. Her whole life led her to this point. As an orphan growing up, she invented royal parents and a magical future for herself. Just when puberty and poverty were about to lay waste her fantasies, she was given to the Bone Witch, making the magical part real. Now the rest was coming to pass — she had a horse beneath her, a

charming knight at her side, and a quest ahead with the kingdom's future at stake. She took her straw doll out of her dress, putting it in the black mare's saddle bag.

Only one thing made her uneasy: her knight was a foreigner, not required to care if there was a curse on Markovy. And he was a real baron to boot, who did not need her royal dreams and extravagant lies. She asked softly and sincerely, "Are you sure you want to do this? You are free to go your own way if you wish."

"Heavens no, *Mademoiselle*." He grinned happily. "Not when my lady has at long last landed me on the winning side."



COMING ATTRACTIONS

"THE RICH ARE not like you and I," said Scott to Ernest famously several decades past.

Jack Dann has given some consideration to this assertion and produced a lovely novella in homage to Mr. Fitzgerald. "The Diamond Pit" takes us back to the 1920s with a wild and woolly story about the rich and the not-so-rich. Part *Lost Horizons*, part *Gatsby*, "The Diamond Pit" is our cover story next month and we think you're going to like it.

Also on the schedule for July is a very different sort of literary tribute—an *hommage* rather than an homage. Allen Steele looks back mischievously to an old friend of young readers. The story won't involve his Repelatron Skyway, his Aquatomic Tracker, his Deep-Sea Hydrodome, or his Dyna-4 Capsule, but rather it will feature: "Tom Swift and His Humongous Mechanical Dude."

Next month promises to bring more stories and the regular features too, and down the road, you can look forward to new stories from Ron Goulart, Carol Emshwiller, Robert Reed, and Carolyn Ives Gilman, to name just a few. Make sure your subscription's up to date so you won't miss any of the fun.

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CURIOSITIES

THE TOWER OF OBLIVION, BY OLIVER ONIONS (1921)

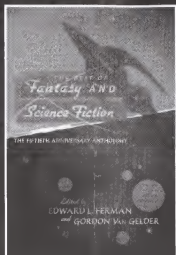
THESE DAYS if Oliver Onions is mentioned at all, beyond a snigger at his name, it is usually because of his incomparable ghost story "The Beckoning Fair One" in the aptly titled *Widdershins*. Yet Onions wrote much more, many of them curiosities, from the wonderfully innocent, yet anally challenging, *Draw in Your Stool* (odd and moody tales of a more traditional sort) to the harshly alien *The Story of Ragged Robyn* and the suffocatingly mesmeric *The Hand of Kornelius Voyt*. But one book that stands menacingly above all these, like a Hodgsonian House of Silence, is *The Tower of Oblivion*.

It's the story of novelist Derwent Rose as told by his confidant Sir George Coverham. Rose discovers that he is growing younger, not a day at a time, but in occasional unpredictable leaps of

years, which happen when he sleeps. Although physically forty-five at the start of the novel he has become thirty-five, but with his future memories intact, and he believes he will regress till sixteen and then die. Beautifully written in homage to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which has a similar atmosphere, *The Tower of Oblivion* has Onions grappling with trying to portray a man whose memories of past events intensifies as memories of the present (in real time) fade. Rose tries to recapture lost moments of a past that only exists for him within a present that means nothing. Rose's depiction of his memory as a flickering candle in the dark is a haunting image as is the story's climax as Rose meets his fate striving to the end to resolve the enigmas of his life. Poignant, challenging, breathtaking. ॐ

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